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KING KENT

OR THE BANDITS OF THE BASON

CHAPTER I.

THE TORTURES OF THE LOST.

THE Rio San Saba, Texas, is a branch of the Rio Colorado; the point of junction of the two rivers, being some three hundred miles from the Gulf of Mexico. Not more than ten miles from the confluence of these streams, there is an extensive horse-shoe bend in the San Saba, which is fully a half-mile across; the swell of the bend being to the eastward.

The eastern bank of the river is rocky; indeed an almost inaccessible cliff, some sixty feet in height, forms the east side of the San Saba at the swell in question; this cliff being honey-combed with caves, within which live thousands of swarms of bees.

There is no portion of the American Continent that is richer in varied flora than that along the prairies which border either side of this somewhat noted stream; and, as may be supposed, the bottom-lands teem with game of all kinds known in that latitude.

But in no section are black bears to be found in such numbers, from the fact that the bees migrate in swarms from the caves, and hive in every hollow-tree in the bottom-timber. Their little stores being constantly robbed by Bruin, as may be imagined, his meat is generally juicy and delicious.

The big bend, we have mentioned, was a per-

BY

BUCKSKIN SAM.

"CLUTCHING A BRAVE WITH EACH HAND, BY THE HAIR OF THE HEAD, HE SPRUNG FROM THE CLIFF—A PIERCING, HORRIBLE YELL SHOOTING FROM HIS LIPS!"

fect paradise in the old days when there were no ranches on the river; it being a favorite camping-place for all prairie roamers, red, yellow, and white. Consequently many a fierce and bloody fight came off within the limits of the bend, and many a shriek of agony echoed through the moss-draped arches of the timber.

There was an extensive level prairie, bordered by towering timber, and this was covered with a rich carpet of grass, mingled with which were flowers of every hue and fragrance. No more beautiful scene can well be imagined, than was this great San Saba bend, a score of years ago. But, Eden as it was to view, it oft more resembled a Gehenna; for many a war-party of Comanches galloped, in all their horrid paraphernalia, toward the east, to leave a trail of blood, devastation, and death, behind them; and, perhaps, to encounter their fierce foes, the Apaches, bent upon the same sanguinary mission.

Then, indeed, a hell of sights and sounds would follow; these war-parties of red-men, although neighbors, always fighting with desperation, to the death.

With this brief description, we will proceed with our narrative; the time of which we write being a quarter of a century ago, when the San Saba was beyond the uttermost westward line of border ranches; although many Texans, who had at times encamped upon its banks, when on scouting expeditions against the Indians, often afterward thought and dreamed of the stream in question, as a most desirable "locate" for "ranching it."

It was in the earlier part of the night, upon a certain date, which it is needless here to be particular about, that we wish to draw the reader's attention to the point where the cliffs arose—a huge, rough rock wall, barring the waters of the San Saba from rolling further eastward. The silvery moon rode high in the heavens, flooding the earth with its weird, but agreeable light.

The west bank of the river was low, and, for a few yards from the water, free from trees or undergrowth; the soil being rocky. But, beyond this clear belt arose the tall, dense timber; the thickets beneath adding to the dismalness of the view. Indeed, all in the bottom-timber was depressing and forbidding to look upon; the moon's rays failing to pierce the Egyptian darkness within the wide belt of trees and undergrowth.

The water at the base of the cliff, in fact the whole river at this point, swept slowly around the wide curve; here and there, a ripple giving to it the semblance of molten silver, but elsewhere being inky black, in deep contrast. No wilder, or more dismal scene could well be imagined, even were there nothing to be seen but the natural features of the view; but living, moving objects there were, which rendered the vista ten times more repelling—ay, which transformed it into a veritable Hades.

The calm night air would suddenly echo with sounds that chilled man's blood with horror; and flitting forms would be seen, making night hideous by giving vent to their vengeful exultation in demoniac yells.

What occasioned those yells?

We shall see.

Along the clear space on the west bank of the stream, between the timber and the waters, flit a horde of paint-daubed Comanches, in all their gear of savage war. One after the other, in long strides, all dashing glances from their serpent-like eyes, that glittered in the moonlight—all gazing upward toward the top of the cliff on the opposite side of the river, high up over the silvery sheen of the waters.

The gaze of all is expectant, while at times, out from the brutal lips of one and another, shot the same exultant, horrible yell.

Soon they reach the central portion of the swell of the bend, and there they stand, each straight as his lance-shaft, silent and motionless. Naked from the waist up; naught except buckskin leggings, breech-cloth, and moccasins, in the way of apparel—naught to impede their muscular bronzed arms, in the fierce fights in which they are liable to be engaged.

Full fifty of these red pirates of the prairies are there; and the one at their head is a perfect Hercules, from whose fillet flaunts the eagle-plumes.

Why does not the moon change her pale light to a fiery blaze, to complete the wild scene?

Why do these red rovers of the llanos gaze upward?

Why did they give vent to those terrific yells? We shall see anon.

For some minutes all remained silent and motionless as statues; then, cut from the throat of the chief, came a whoop of peculiar intonation.

The signal is answered.

The answer comes from the opposite side of the river, high up on the cliff, and causes scores of fully equipped and wild-eyed mustangs to prance and snort in fright; giving the few red braves, who guard them, much trouble to prevent a stampede.

These are the horses of the war-party.

A moment after the answering whoop, a dozen warriors appear upon the edge of the cliff above;

while, in their midst, tightly clutched, and being dragged forward to the edge of the steep, is a captive—a white man.

He is a man of superb physique, fully six feet in height, although not more than two-and-twenty years of age, as is evident by his youthful features.

His garments are torn and ragged, while his body and arms are scratched and bruised by thorns, and by his struggles with his captors. Little streams of blood flow down his forehead, from a wound on his head; and one is visible in his shoulder, evidently done with a knife.

The moonlight fully reveals his form, in all its manly beauty, and his handsome, honest face, as his blue eyes are turned heavenward with prayerful expression, as if commending his soul to God.

Do the inhuman fiends propose casting their captive over the cliff?

One would thus judge, did he not know the character of the red demons.

Such a death would not satisfy their insane thirst for revenge. The sufferings of their captive would be too soon over.

However, he was not destined to remain long in ignorance of his fate.

A yell from their chief caused the braves on the cliff to quicken their movements.

The Indians were on the war-path.

This was evident.

Quickly a lariat was secured to each side of the poor man's belt, then his wrists were bound high up to these ropes, in a torturing position.

This done, over the cliff's edge the apparently doomed man was slid, four braves holding fast to the lariats, the ends of which were secured to the stumps of pines, upon the brink of the steep.

Down the captive was lowered; and there, full thirty feet from the top of the cliff, and the same distance from the waters below—midway up that wall of rock, which was honeycombed, and filled with myriads of bees—hung the victim; while in front of him stood a crescent of exultant demons, over the silvery waters of the Rio San Saba!

As this fiendish work was completed, the braves above ran swiftly down the river, descended the cliff at a favorable point, and crossing the stream, joined their brother butchers—their coming being the signal for a mad whoop from every throat.

The next moment, in long strides, the red braves disappeared in the shades; and, five minutes after, might have been seen upon their wild-eyed steeds, flying over the plain, and speeding toward the line of border settlements, bent on carnage and death.

Thus on, through the night, to inaugurate scenes of rapine, to scatter despair and desolation, dashed the Comanche horde—three-score in number—leaving their victim, swinging by the two lariats, high over the waters of the San Saba; his arms stretched, and bound above his head to the ropes that held him suspended above the silvery sheen of waters.

His face is stamped with hopeless despair, which is transformed to horror, as he slowly turns his head, and realizes his position fully—realizes the object of his fiendish captors, in thus leaving him suspended in the midst of the cliff. One glance is enough.

It is more than enough.

He knows the caves swarm with bees.

He knows that at sunrise, tens of thousands of these insect's will fly out from the caverns.

They will discover the strange object—this invader of their homes—swaying mockingly before them.

His body will be literally covered with bees, each striving to bury its sting in his poor flesh!

This is to be his doom to be stung to death—to die a prolonged death of most excruciating torture, by hunger and thirst, the most maddening!

As he fully comprehends this, the strong man trembles like an aspen leaf, his handsome face contorts in torturing despair; while, from the depths of his very soul, in most deep and prayerful intonation, come the words, as his blue eyes seek to pierce the starry sky, "Father in Heaven, have mercy! My cross is greater than I can bear!"

This man, suspended thus, and seemingly doomed to a terrible death, is the hero of our frontier tale; and the circumstances connected with his capture, and torture, will be explained as we proceed.

CHAPTER II.

LANDERS RANCH.

THE Rio Leon is a tributary of the Rio Brazos; the former emptying its waters into the latter, at a point fifty miles below where the city of Waco is now located—the town of Cameron being on the Leon, some twenty miles from the confluence of the two rivers.

Cameron was so named, in honor of the gallant and brave Captain Ewen Cameron, one of the unfortunate Mier prisoners, who were marched in chains from Mier, on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande, to the town of Salado, where they were forced to draw beans from an uplifted sombrero—every tenth bean being black, and condemning whoever drew it, to be shot.

Cameron, although he drew a prize in this lottery of death—that is, a white bean—was, by order of the officer in command, a tool of Santa Anna, taken out, and shot like a dog.

At the time of which we write, there were several ranches between the little settlement of Cameron, on the Rio Leon, and the lordly Rio Brazos.

One of these, the most extensive stock ranch on the Rio Leon, was owned by Colonel Landers, familiarly known as "Lucky Landers," from the fact that he had been very fortunate in his business affairs. The colonel was a large man, of strong mold and commanding in appearance, with a decided military air; in fact, he had served with distinction in the Mexican war.

His hair was gray, and worn long, as was the custom in Texas in the old days; more from the scarcity of tonsorial artists than aught else.

He was florid in complexion, with honest blue eyes, and was kindness personified; he being a general favorite among all classes.

There were times, however, when the old ranchero was far from pleasant in disposition, this being after an occasional indulgence, to excess, in ardent spirits.

Colonel Landers had but one child, a daughter, Lola by name; she being the acknowledged belle of the Rio Leon, and, for that matter, of the upper Brazos. Indeed, the proud father was wont to declare that she was the best, the handsomest, and the most intelligent girl in the Lone Star State.

And the old man was not far out of the way.

Lola was of medium height, with a well-developed sylph-like form; she being but sweet sixteen, and lovely as a fairy.

Her hair was abundant, long, wavy, and golden in color; her eyes, a heavenly blue; and her complexion, like the prairie rose when first bursting into bloom.

Sprightly and gay was Lola Landers, ever flitting here and there, singing merrily, and with a kind word for every one, from the highest to the lowest.

The colonel did not trouble himself, to any extent, with the "running" of the ranch; but left this to a superintendent, of whom we will soon speak. The old ranchero spent much of his time hunting, fishing, and visiting his neighbors; although those neighbors were, in many instances, thirty miles away—the nearest being five miles toward the Brazos.

Some six thousand head of cattle, a thousand sheep, and a couple of hundred breed mares—the last, but recently purchased in Mexico—these constituted the stock of the ranch; but the colonel had considerable bottom-land fenced, which was planted with corn, wheat, and rye; he owning about a dozen field hands, which he had brought from East Texas, some two years previous to the opening of our narrative.

There were a half-dozen Mexicans in the employ of Colonel Landers; these living in *jacals* which they had themselves built in the bottom-timber.

Nor was the ranch without the irrepressible Irishman, in the person of Mickey McCafferty, who was a discharged soldier from Fort Belknap; he having wandered down the Brazos, been befriended by the colonel and Lola, and become a fixture at the ranch.

Mickey made himself generally useful; but was always getting himself into scrapes; and strange to say, considering he had been in the army, he knew next to nothing of fire-arms. This fact led the colonel to decide that Mickey had been but a raw recruit, who had cunningly played his game to gain his discharge, by pretending some physical disability.

He pretended to have lost his papers, and no one doubted this who knew him; indeed, the wonder was that he had not lost his head, for he was absurdly careless in everything.

No one had any suspicion that the Irishman had deserted; for, had this been the case, he would not have dared remain at Landers Ranch.

And now, for the superintendent, who is to be our hero, through these pages; and a hero he was, in every sense of the word.

His name was Richard Robinson, but he had not escaped being "saddled" with a *sobriquet*, Texas style; he being universally known as "Daring Dick," from his brave and daring character, which indeed bordered upon recklessness.

Dick was a splendid specimen of manhood, full six feet in height, with sinews of steel; strong as a lion, and agile and quick in motion as a panther.

His hair was worn low upon his shoulders, being dark-brown, and wavy. His eyes were dark hazel in color, and were keen as those of any Indian. His face was handsome—so handsome, indeed, was he in form and in face, so genial, pure-minded, and gentlemanly, that Lola had fallen in love with him at once, upon his arrival with her father at the ranch, one year previous to his introduction to the reader.

Richard Robinson came of an old, and aristocratic Virginia family, but his parents had died when he was twenty years of age—or two

years before we meet him at Landers Ranch—and, upon a settlement of the estate, it was found that his father had lost nearly all his property, through signing notes for so-called friends, and by injudicious speculations.

Not more than five thousand dollars remained, after settling up the estate; and the bulk of this young Robinson deposited in the Island City Bank, in Galveston, and then started up the country, to inspect the same, with a view to establishing a ranch.

It so happened, that, upon his arrival at Austin, he fortunately, when wandering through the town one evening, came to a point where Colonel Landers, who was somewhat under the influence of strong drink, was engaged in a wordy dispute with a couple of desperadoes.

One of these ruffians jerked his revolver to shoot the colonel, when Robinson knocked up the weapon, the bullet flying over the old ranchero's head, but so near as to clip a piece from the crown of his hat.

This, of course, drew the anger of both villains upon Dick, and they opened fire upon him immediately. Our young friend, however, was lightning-like in motion, and a dead shot.

He planted a bullet in the brain of each, but received, in return, a ball in his shoulder, which laid him up for weeks.

Colonel Landers had been sobered, at the first shot, though he was not quick enough to be of any assistance to Dick. He realized fully that the young stranger had saved his life, and he was filled with gratitude, which warmed into friendship of the purest and strongest type.

The colonel interested some of the leading citizens of the capital in Dick, who took up his quarters at Stringer's Hotel, on the avenue; and he received the very best of care, and medical attendance. In short, he was the lion of the hour.

The celebrated Thompson brothers, Ben and Billy, were then in their teens, but they were celebrated from one end of Texas to the other; and Johnnie Stringer, the son of the proprietor of the hotel, was about their age. All three youths were on hand, and vied with each other in their attentions to the wounded stranger.

The colonel was obliged to return to his ranch on the Leon; but he made his way back to Austin, upon the recovery of Dick, and insisted that the latter should return with him, and take charge of Landers Ranch; making him, in everything but name, his adopted son.

Thus it will be seen that the young man met Lola Landers under the most favorable circumstances; and it could scarce have been otherwise, all things considered, that this youth and maiden, who seemed created for each other, should fall madly in love at their first meeting.

However, it is an old adage, that "the course of true love never runs smooth," and it proved so, in the case of Dick and Lola. Had it been otherwise, this story would never have been written.

Indeed, although the future of Lola Landers and Daring Dick appeared to be clear of all clouds, their love-trail to be bordered with bright flowers, and their sky of roseate hue; yet they were destined to suffer misery, beyond the very wildest imaginings, and that in more ways than one, as will be shown.

And the old colonel, who dreamed not of anything to mar his happiness, was destined to be tortured to the very soul—destined to owe his life, more than once, to Daring Dick—and the latter, to prove the depth of his love for Lola, by superhuman deeds, and torturing privations; his very soul racked, and his strong frame agonized, through his unbending, undying love.

At the commencement of our tale, all was apparently running smoothly at Landers Ranch; but there was one in its near vicinity, who was more deadly in purpose than a hungry panther, more merciless than an Apache, when association and education are considered.

A black cloud hangs over Landers Ranch—a serpent in the path of the beautiful Lola!

And neither she, nor the one she loved, is free from forebodings of dread danger to come; although neither of them, in this respect, has confided in the other, or in the colonel, and that because neither wished to cause the other alarm or apprehension, which they hope in their hearts may be unfounded.

CHAPTER III.

KING KENT'S CRIME.

WE have mentioned that colonel Landers visited much among his neighbors, but he made one exception.

This was a ranchero, on the Rio Brazos, near the junction of the Rio Leon with the same.

The name of this man was Knowles, and he was known as Captain Knowles, he having been a seafaring man. Some, indeed many, believed that he had been one of the pirates of the Gulf.

The captain was well to do, and it was thought had much gold buried; for he owned but a small number of cattle, and yet lived in grander, and more extensive style than even Colonel Landers.

He was much addicted to drink and cards, and when gaming was said to cheat in every possible manner. Colonel Landers had, at one time, been a frequent visitor at the Knowles Ranch; but,

during the last of these visits, he had been fleeced while playing cards with the captain, who had plied the old ranchero with brandy; and had broken off all connection with Knowles, their difficulty at their last meeting nearly ending in a duel—in fact, an encounter was only prevented by the prompt action of Daring Dick, who vowed that the captain should fight him, and to the death, if he met and killed Colonel Landers.

As Dick was a dead shot, his threat served to prevent a meeting, by cooling the anger of Knowles, who was at heart an arrant coward.

Captain Knowles had a son, who was of the same age as Daring Dick, and a "chip of the old block." This young man's name was Kent Knowles, but he was universally known as "King Kent," from the fact that the "king" was a favorite card with him, and that he had, at one time, won ten thousand dollars in Austin, by betting on the king against the ace.

King Kent was a typical Texan desperado, unprincipled and lawless, and frequently boasted of having killed five men before arriving at the age of twenty years. His boast was true, but in every instance, he had managed to get in the first shot before his opponent had time to cock a revolver; thus taking an advantage, which made him no more nor less than a murderer, and a cowardly one at that. He had, until the advent of Daring Dick, been a visitor at Landers Ranch, and had fallen as deeply in love with Lola Landers as it was possible for one of his depraved nature to do.

He had even gone so far as to declare his love, and had been considerably, but firmly, rejected. He had then flown into a most violent passion, and swore that no other man should wed her while he trod the earth.

He went further, and vowed by all the fiends in Tophet that she should, some day not far distant be his, whether she would or not. He had secreted himself in the timber of the Leon, near to the ranch of the colonel, where he knew Lola was in the habit of walking, and had confronted her; surprising, and terrifying her, by his declaration and threats.

The poor maiden, knowing the character of the miscreant kept the matter secret, fearing that her father would, in his fury, seek revenge, and be slain by the Knowleses.

Under these circumstances, the reader may imagine the jealous rage and vengeful fury that ruled King Kent, at the time when Daring Dick arrived on the Leon, and was made at home by the colonel and his daughter.

He swore and raved insanely, vowing he would have the life of the man, who, it was soon plain to be seen, was Lola's favored suitor.

King Kent was about the same height and build as Dick, and fully as wiry and strong.

But there all comparison ceased. His face was swarthy, his eyes black and treacherous, his hair long, black, and straight as that of an Indian.

Altogether he was a most villainous-looking young man; a sharp-pointed black mustache and imperial, lending to him a Frenchy look. He dressed, as did Daring Dick, in border style; with buckskin breeches, top-boots, woolen shirt, and broad-brimmed black sombrero. He always rode a magnificent black horse, which was noted for both speed and endurance.

Dick had also a favorite equine pard, but his steed was what is commonly known in Texas as a "buckskin;" the animal being strongly marked by having a jet-black mane and tail—the latter sweeping the prairie grass as he rode, and both being abundant, wavy, and glossy.

King Kent meant to keep his oath, when he swore that he would kill Daring Dick; although he had not the remotest idea of giving his rival a fair show. He had heard of Dick's having shot two desperadoes, in Austin, in defense of the colonel, and this caused the miscreant to be prudent.

Many times he lay in ambush, but was always unsuccessful in his most dastardly attempt.

The day came, however, which was destined to be one never to be forgotten by King Kent; and it is necessary for us to recount the occurrence, as it has a strong bearing upon those connected with our story.

At last, the cowardly Kent gained information from one of Colonel Landers's Mexicans, in regard to the proposed route of Dick, in search of some stray stock; and he resolved to lie in wait, and shoot his hated rival. This was some six months after the arrival of the latter at Landers Ranch.

Daring Dick had mounted his favorite steed, early in the morning, and had galloped toward the Brazos, taking a northwest direction. It was some two hours before he reached the vicinity of the bottom-timber.

Had he been able to pierce the dark shades ahead of him, he would have seen the only enemy he had on earth.

There, crouched, in a thicket, teeth set, and black eyes glaring with a murderous light, was King Kent—rifle in hand, and at full cock!

Unconscious of this, or of the presence of any human being, friend or foe, Dick urged his horse into the dark shades, toward the river, following a path that had been made by wild beasts.

He was whistling joyously, his face radiant with happiness. As he rode into the dark shades,

he was thinking of the parting words of Lola, and he smiled at the recollection of them.

But the smile suddenly died away. It was banished by a sudden and unaccountable feeling. He seemed to feel the presence of some deadly foe, and he shot piercing glances in every direction; but naught, except the slowly swaying festoons of moss overhead, was visible.

As he drew near to the river-bank, however, the sharp crack of a revolver rung and echoed through the arches of the timber, and the form of the young man remained for a single instant clutching the bridle-reins, and then fell, as if the bullet had pierced his brain.

Daring Dick rolled from the bushes on the side of the cattle-path, and there lay limp and apparently lifeless, his fair face the hue of death.

A moment after, the face of King Kent was revealed from the foliage of an adjacent thicket.

The miscreant's swarthy face, first exultant in expression, became suddenly ashen, and he trembled in every limb. His one object, revenge, had evidently, until this moment, ruled him; but now he realized that he had committed a cowardly murder, which would condemn him to the rope, if detected, and he feared that some one might have heard the report of his revolver—that some one might have observed Daring Dick on the plain.

The *vaqueros* of the old ranchero might be in the vicinity, and although the Greasers were in his pay, they might betray him; or, forcing him to bribe them heavily, might hold him in their power.

This, however, troubled him not so much as the thought of the Vigilantes.

If the crime was laid at his door, and proved, they would hang him like a dog.

Daring Dick was a general favorite, and there were many who would avenge him.

The miscreant was filled with the most abject terror.

He would have given worlds, had he not allowed his jealous fury to rule him to the extent of committing this deliberate murder.

But it was now too late for regrets.

The dastard deed was done.

Not for an instant did King Kent think that the least breath of life remained in the form of his hated rival. He was a dead shot and had aimed at the forehead of Daring Dick.

It would not do, however, to leave the body there.

It would be plain proof against him, as his trail could be easily traced, in the soft, broken soil.

He sprung, like a panther, from the thicket into the path, rushed to the body of his victim, and grasping an ankle in each hand, with a strength born of desperation and terror, he dragged Daring Dick down the path, to the river-bank. He paused not for a moment, to examine his victim, and ascertain if life was extinct; indeed, he feared to look again upon that blood-stained face. As it was, it was photographed on his brain forever!

Hesitating not for an instant, King Kent clutched the body, and hurled it over the high bank. It struck the waters, with a far-sounding splash, disappearing beneath the waters of the deep and on-rolling Brazos!

At that very moment, as if proceeding in bitter condemnation and vengeful threatening, from the supposed corpse shot a wild, peculiar yell, echoing amid the natural domes and arches of the Brazos bottom, as if a score of fiends had repeated the cry.

With a half-stifled shriek, his hands clinched until the nails penetrated the flesh, his craven heart in his throat, and he gasping for breath, King Kent bounded from the spot, as though the very demons were in pursuit of him.

Well he knew that the yell had come from beyond.

What then?

Had some one witnessed his cowardly deed?

It was more than probable, else why had the yell sounded at that particular moment?

Never was a man in greater terror.

Like a maniac, he tore through the thickets, leaping high over piles of deadwood, until he reached his horse. Then, taking a bottle of brandy from his saddle-bags, he drank freely of the fiery liquor.

The next moment, he sprung into his saddle, when again that strange and unaccountable yell shot through the timber.

With a terrible oath, King Kent drove spurs, rowel deep; his horse, with a wild snort, sprung into the air, and then sped, crashing through the undergrowth, and up the river—for the dastard dared not venture down-stream, toward his home; and the home of his victim.

CHAPTER IV.

OUT OF THE DEPTHS.

AT the time that Daring Dick was approaching the timber of the Rio Brazos, on the south side of the stream, and King Kent was crouched in his covert with murderous intent, the opposite side of the river was not without its occupant.

Directly across the rolling waters from the ambush of the assassin—which, however, was not within view from the river—was a clear

space beneath the towering trees, utterly devoid of undergrowth, and covered with a soft carpet of dead leaves. The sun failed even to shoot an arrow of light down into these dense shades, and it was a beautiful, as well as a wild and weird scene.

Within this natural chamber of the bottom, which was surrounded by dense thickets, was one of Nature's children—ay, a king of Nature—his every glance and bearing proclaiming this, beyond dispute, to any one gifted with the art of reading character by the form and face.

The scene, and the man, together with his horse, would have delighted the eye of an artist, and caused Cooper to seize his pen, with an inspiration far beyond that which ruled him, when he rendered historic, the "Last of the Mohicans."

Leaning against a huge tree, in a proud and kingly poise, both hands clasped around the barrel of a rifle near its muzzle, was an Indian.

He was tall, fully six feet, and with not an ounce of superfluous flesh upon his symmetrical form, which was muscular, and indeed perfect.

His face showed much more of intelligence than is often seen among the red-men. His brow was lofty, and his chin and lips indicated great firmness, and an indomitable spirit.

A beaded belt about his waist supported fancifully decorated and fringed buckskin leggings, an army size Colt's revolver, and a long scalping-knife. A shoulder-strap, over right and under left, held in position not only a bullet-pouch and paint-bag, but a bow and quiver of arrows as well.

His leggings, too, were decorated with scalps.

Noticeable was it, that these scalps were all of coarse black hair, like his own, which hung below his belt, and was held back of his ears by a fancy fillet, which covered half his brow, and from which flaunted three eagle-feathers—the insignia of a chief.

Three bars of vermilion ran up and down each cheek, across his brow and around his neck, a narrow pigment being between, with small spots of yellow ocher. Upon his broad breast was a perfect representation of a turtle, with head and claws protruding. This was done in different colored pigments.

Many scars might have been observed upon his arms and breast, as well as the track of a bullet across his temple.

This was none other than Turtle, the Tonkaway, a friend to Sam Houston, and to all Texans, as was his tribe, and its principal chief, "Old Placador."

Standing near its master, at times pawing the sward, and then gazing in a seeming wondering way at the chief, was a superb black horse, glossy, and well marked for speed and endurance. The horse had, evidently, but recently satisfied itself in the way of grazing. It was, without doubt, a cross between a mustang stud and a Spanish mare, having the better qualities of both.

A Texan saddle was girthed upon the animal, but there was no bridle, for the simple Indian jaw-strap answered in lieu of the same.

The horse stood free.

Turtle's keen black eyes roved, more from habit evidently than from any suspicion of enemies, seeming to pierce the thickets, and his sense of hearing appeared to be strained. Perhaps something akin to instinct warned him that a deed of blood was about to be consummated, beyond the dark rolling waters, that were arched with the limbs of trees from either side, although these waters were not within his view.

His manner, in a few moments, changed; he leaving the support of the tree-trunk and standing erect, in much the same position as described previously; for the black horse had suddenly turned half-about, facing the river, and gazing suspiciously, its ears pricked in the same direction.

This was but for a moment. Man and mustang stood silent and rigid, as if turned to stone.

Then rung and echoed the report of King Kent's revolver.

"Waugh!"

This guttural exclamation from Turtle terminated in mingled wonder and amazement. Then he, in one bound, sprung upon his steed, and urged the animal toward the river.

Soon the Tonkaway sat his horse on the bank, the chief gazing over the stream.

He evidently had not supposed that any human beings were in the vicinity. As it was, he believed some hunter was over the Brazos. Yet it seemed strange that a hunter should not have used his rifle to shoot game. The practiced ears of Turtle told him that a revolver had been fired.

Yet no suspicion lurked in the breast of the Tonkaway that a tragedy had just been consummated.

Had this been so, he would at once have dashed into the river and swum his horse across.

Not a living object met his view.

The bank beyond the stream was thickly overgrown with bushes, causing it to be impossible

to see beyond, even had the timber away from the river been free from thickets.

But Turtle was fated soon to be not only astonished, but infuriated to a great degree.

For, while he thus sat his mustang, gazing over the river, he beheld the form of a man, shot through the screen of bushes, and plunged into the rolling waters. Although the Tonkaway caught but a flitting glance of the man who had been hurled into the river, he recognized in him one of the best friends he had on earth—Daring Dick—who had presented him with the very rifle he now held in his hand, and whom he had traveled far to visit and hunt with.

Almost at the very moment that the body of Dick struck the water, Turtle shot out a yell, expressive of his fury; for well he knew his young friend had met with foul play, and he was resolved that the murderer should expiate the crime with his life.

Without hesitation, the chief urged the horse into the stream, the animal swimming over the river in a quartering course; Turtle making calculations in connection with the current, and aiming to strike the point where the same would have carried the body by the time he had gained the opposite side of the Brazos.

In a very short time the red chief reached the current near the shore, some distance below the point where the miscreant, King Kent, had hurled his victim.

Eagerly the Tonkaway scanned the waters, not allowing his horse to swim near enough the bank to endanger Daring Dick, should the latter still have life in his body; and soon the chief gave utterance to his usual ejaculation—this time blended with a vengeful fury that was terrible to witness, his black eyes being filled with a murderous light:

"Waugh!"

Bending over, as this single utterance left his lips, Turtle thrust his arm beneath the waters, and drew up the head of the seemingly dead man. The bank being too high at this point for the horse to surmount, the chief guided the animal by pressure of thigh, down the stream, parallel with the shore, and towing alongside the limp form of Daring Dick.

Could the wretched assassin have witnessed this scene—could he have beheld the expression upon the face of the Tonkaway, usually so stoical, he would have hastened to put many miles between himself and the scene of his crime.

Turtle seemed to shrink from examining the body, his gaze being fixed upon the deathlike face.

He saw the wound upon the head of his white friend.

Had the bullet penetrated the brain?

Was Daring Dick dead?

If so, who had fired the fatal shot?

These thoughts flashed through the Tonkaway's mind, and he swore vengeance.

He dropped the jaw-strap from his left hand quickly, placing his finger over the wound in Dick's head. Then, out from the chief's lips came a yell, expressive of heartfelt joy, yet not devoid of a mixture of the vengeance that was his ruling passion.

And no wonder was it that these yells of our red friend caused the miscreant who heard them, to pale and tremble, and then speed up the river, in his flight.

A moment after his last outcry, the Tonkaway discovered a small gully, that led down to the water; thus affording an exit from the river. He, therefore, guided his steed up the same, springing from the horse, as the water grew shallow. Then, taking Daring Dick in his arms, he bore him from the gully, and laid him upon the carpet of leaves near at hand, and beside a thicket.

Giving a peculiar bird-like whistle the chief summoned his horse; the animal, dripping with water, walking deliberately to his side.

Procuring a flask from his *malettos*, Turtle drew the cork, and placing the mouth to the lips of the wounded man, poured a tiny stream of liquor between them.

Soon he heaved a deep sigh, followed by a groan, and then clasped his forehead with his hands; pressing hard, as if his brain was tortured.

A moment after, he opened his eyes, staring wildly about him, in a strange and bewildered manner, evidently not comprehending his condition, or position.

The chief stood before him, erect, his arms folded across his breast, and his black eyes fixed upon the face of his white friend.

The features of the Indian had resumed their usual stoical expression.

A moment Dick gazed at the chief, who was dripping wet; then he felt of his own clothing, in a half-dazed manner.

Instantly the near past seemed to be realized by him, and he sprang to a sitting posture; thrusting out his hand to the Tonkaway, as from the lips of the latter burst out again his favorite ejaculation:

"Waugh!"

"Turtle, my red pard, in the name of wonder, how came you here, and what has happened?"

Then he placed his hand upon his wounded head.

"I believe I have been shot, but how came I to be wet, and you and your horse also? From appearances, I should say that you have rescued me from the river; but, in Heaven's name, how came I in the Brazos?"

"Bad man shoot Dick," answered the chief, with a sweeping gesture up the river. "Turtle over Brazos. Hear shot. Ride fast to river. See Dick fall in water. Know bad man shoot, then throw in Brazos. Swim horse, then find my white brother. He is here. It is good."

"Bad man bullet no go in head. Turtle he yell. Mebbe so bad man ride fast. Turtle follow trail. Have blood. War-path open. Who bad man shoot Dick? I have spoken. Turtle ears open."

"There's where you've got me, Tonk. I haven't the remotest idea who shot me; but I reckon we can find out, and we will. It was the act of a murderous coward. Turtle, I owe you my life, and I shall not forget the debt."

"Too much heap talk," returned the chief, passing the flask. "Drink whisky. Make strong. Then come find trail. Turtle heap mad. Take bad man scalp. War-path open. It is good. Waugh!"

CHAPTER V.

TURTLE ON THE TRAIL.

No sooner had the Tonkaway concluded his characteristic remarks upon the situation of affairs, than he led his horse up to the side of Daring Dick, pointed significantly at the saddle, and then strode into the thicket, disappearing up the river.

Dick felt not the least surprise at the sudden departure of his red friend; indeed, he was so wrapped in perplexing thoughts that he, after taking a swallow from the flask of the chief, became for a few moments utterly oblivious of his surroundings. This state was partially due to the benumbing of his brain by the bullet, that had, luckily, glanced along his skull, in place of penetrating it, and thus ending his earthly career, as the miscreant, King Kent, had intended it to do.

Soon, however, Daring Dick recovered sufficiently to reason with sense; and he bathed his head, at the river, poured a quantity of the liquor from the flask upon his wound, and then, mounting the horse of the Tonkaway, gave the animal free jaw-strap. The intelligent mustang immediately started up the river, the young man paying not the slightest attention to his surroundings, for he was in a very strange state of mind.

He was puzzled, in the extreme, to account for his attempted assassination.

He could form no idea as to who it was that had attempted his life.

It did not seem possible that any roving Indians could be in the vicinity; and, even if such was the case, they would not have used firearms, but arrows, to slay him.

Few Indians possessed firearms, as he was well aware. Even those who were friendly seldom owned a rifle, and none that he had ever seen carried a revolver, except Turtle, and his fellow-chief, Rattlesnake.

From all his reasonings, Dick could not arrive at any reasonable conclusion in connection with it, except that it must have been either a white man or a Mexican.

For all that he knew to the contrary, the Greasers on the ranch were friendly to him; indeed, it did not seem possible that any one of them should hold an enmity to the extent of wishing to take his life; and, as to any white man making such a cowardly attempt, Dick could not bring to mind any one who could have a motive, unless it might be some friend of the two ruffians whom he had been obliged to shoot, in Austin, and who might, through a thirst for revenge, have come up the Brazos, for the express purpose of slaying him.

Once, indeed, King Kent entered his mind, as the possible assassin; but this idea was banished as absurd, for the home of Kent was near, and all his hopes and life were undoubtedly centered upon that home and his father; consequently he would not be likely to outlaw himself, even for the gratification of his jealous fury.

Dick well knew that King Kent hated him, for he had been informed that the young gambler and desperado had, as far as his craven heart was capable, loved Lola Landers; and that he had been a visitor at the ranch until he himself had arrived on the Rio Leon.

It seemed impossible that Kent would thus endanger his life, and place his neck in the noose of a rope.

Thus reasoned Daring Dick, as the horse of the Tonkaway bore him along the river-bank, toward the scene of the attempted assassination; and he was much in the dark when he arrived within sight of the chief, as when he started.

However, he was not long to remain in ignorance as to the name of the man who had attempted his life. Turtle, the Tonkaway, stood, with his arms folded, and his rifle leaning against the nearest tree, as Dick rode up to his side.

The face of the Indian was stern, and vengeful glances shot from his black eyes, as he held up before the young man's eyes, a portion of a silken scarf, of peculiar pattern, in colored embroidery; such as was worn by Mexicans, and

by those who aped the fashions of the Rio Grande.

Daring Dick recognized this sash at once; but, if he had not, the words of the chief would have aided him to do so:

"King Kent, he bad man. Try shoot Daring Dick. Hide in bush. He no warrior. He squaw. He must die. King Kent's scalp shall hang on Tu le's belt. A Tonkaway chief has spoken, and lies build not nests on his tongue. It is good. Waugh!"

The young man was dumfounded.

Could it be possible that Kent Knowles had thus placed himself before the rancheros as a cowardly assassin? Could it be possible that the young gambler had outlawed himself in such a way?

Kent would be forced to leave his home forever, or run the chances of being hanged by the Vigilantes.

It seemed incredible.

Yet Daring Dick had the utmost confidence in Turtle, as a trailer. He believed that the chief had other proofs than the scarf.

Consequently, to remove all doubts, although he entertained but slight ones, Dick asked quickly:

"What else have you seen, Turtle? Is it not possible that King Kent has been here, on a hunt, before the wretch who attempted to shoot me arrived?"

"Turtle is not blind. He is not like owl, when sun shine. A squaw could see trail of King Kent. It is plain 'sign,' as buffalo-trail. He hide in bushes. Leave black horse, there,"—pointing to a thicket—make ambush there—pointing to another clump of bushes—"then shoot."

"Look!"—striding up the path—"my white brother fall from horse here. See blood! King Kent, he drag Dick to river. Think dead. Think go down to Big Water (Gulf of Mexico) in Brazos. Then my white brother's friends no know where gone."

"Turtle know trail of black horse. Turtle say King Kent shoot Dick. It is good. Waugh!" And, as if these words were to decide the matter for good, the chief strode from the spot, disappearing in the thickets; and leaving his young friend, seated upon his horse, perfectly bewildered.

Most certainly, there was no doubt in regard to the identity of the assassin; but Daring Dick decided that he would, for the present, keep the matter dark. At the first opportunity, he would confront King Kent, and force him, not only to confess his crime, but to leave the country.

The villain must fight or fly.

Without doubt, he now believed that his victim was dead, and floating down the Rio Brazos.

When he and Kent should meet, the latter would betray his perfidy by a show of superstitious terror.

This would brand him a guilty wretch, without a word being spoken.

Dick resolved that he would now make his way back to the ranch, and the coming night take a ride to the vicinity of Knowles Ranch, where he would stand a chance to see King Kent, if the ruffian had not already fled.

As he came to this decision, the Tonkaway appeared, leading Dick's horse, which he had trailed from the scene of the assassination. Greatly rejoiced was the young man to recover his noble steed, he having feared that the beast had been stolen.

Dismounting from Turtle's mustang, he proceeded to draw the loads from his revolvers, wipe the weapons out carefully, and reload and cap them, ready for any emergency. The thought now occurred to him that the miscreant Kent might even attack Landers Ranch and bear Lola away.

These possibilities drove Dick nearly wild with anxiety; but he would not have entertained the same for a moment had his head not been affected by his wound and he so astounded by the proofs of the perfidy of King Kent.

"Thanks, Turtle!" he said, warmly, upon the arrival of the chief. "I am glad to get back my horse. Did you see the trail of the coward who shot me?"

"Turtle see trail," answered the Indian. "King Kent ride fast. Go through bush. Jump horse over log. Ride like bad spirit on trail. Go up river. Soon swim over Brazos. Ride back to ranch. He think Dick gone on long dark trail."

"Then you believe he will go back to the ranch?"

"Turtle say go back. Coward no go toward Comanche hunting-grounds. Fear lose scalp."

"Think bad spirits yell when throw Dick in river. Turtle, he yell loud, so many times"—holding up two fingers—"Heap scare. Drive spur deep. Bad spirit choke King Kent. Turtle talk straight. It is good. Waugh!"

"I don't wonder he was frightened if you gave two of your yells, Turtle; but I must return to the ranch, for I feel queer."

"Now, my red pard, I wish you would add to the many favors you have done me, by following the trail of King Kent. I will meet you to-night where the Leon pours into the Brazos, two hours after sunset."

"I shall not openly accuse King Kent of his crime at present. I mean only to give him a good scare."

"But I am curious to know where he went after, as he believed, he had disposed of me forever."

"It does not seem possible that he will dare return to his father's ranch, except to prepare for flight; for, after reflecting, he will decide that the yells you gave proceeded from some one who was a witness to his crime."

"What say you, Turtle? Will you follow King Kent's trail, and not molest him, or let him know you are following him?"

"Turtle will follow the trail of King Kent," was the laconic reply, as the Indian tightened his belt somewhat, swung himself into his saddle, and gave a low, peculiar whistle.

The next moment the swaying of bush and twig up the river was all that indicated the recent presence of the Tonkaway chief.

Daring Dick stood alone, at the scene of his attempted assassination, gazing at the agitated bushes, amid which his red pard had disappeared.

Thus he stood staring, for a moment, then vaulted into his saddle, and rode slowly from the timber to the south plain, over which he galloped toward Landers Ranch; for, after the decided assertion of the Indian, he was satisfied that King Kent was on the opposite side of the river, or else afar up the same, and fleeing as though vengeful fiends were on his trail.

Most certainly there was one in close pursuit, who, but for the expressed wishes of Daring Dick, would overtake him, and torture him to the death.

CHAPTER VI.

PURSUED BY CONSCIENCE.

WHEN King Kent galloped headlong from the scene of his cowardly crime, he was the most terrified man imaginable.

The unearthly yell of the Tonkaway still rung in his ears, and in his superstitious terror he trembled as if stricken with an ague-fit; being forced to cling to his saddle-horn, to keep from falling.

He frequently gazed backward, over his shoulder, his eyes filled with dread expectation, as if he truly believed the fiends of vengeance were in chase.

The dark, gloomy shades and funereal-looking festoons of moss above his head, gave a weird aspect to the scenes through which he dashed. The sighing moss and fluttering foliage seemed to be the whisperings of demons; and the violent whisking of branches, the lash and spring of serpents upon him.

Demoralized, indeed, was the brain of King Kent; and the more he became superstitiously impressed by a recollection of the unearthly yells, the more brandy he drank; and the more fiery liquor he poured down his throat the more magnified and unnatural became the sounds of the dark woods, through which he galloped at dangerous speed—his neck being often in danger from low limbs of trees, and more than once his horse came near dashing its brains out against the tree-trunks.

His repulsive, swarthy face was now ashen in hue.

He had not the slightest doubt in his mind as to Daring Dick's having been slain.

He was convinced that his bullet had pierced the brain of his hated rival, but he regretted not having examined the wound, to make assurance doubly sure. But he could not have done this.

His very soul had been filled with horror, his blood congealed in his veins, when he saw the face of his victim, and heard the fall of the supposed corpse from the horse to the ground.

But, even had the bullet not penetrated the brain, Daring Dick had undoubtedly been senseless when thrown into the deep, dark waters of the Rio Brazos.

This, of itself, would have insured his death, beyond a doubt.

But, from whose lips had that unearthly shriek originated?

Had it been a denizen of earth, or a fiend from the lower regions, rejoicing at the loss of a soul through murder?

Was the spirit of the man he had so basely slain, following him, and crying for vengeance?

These, and like thoughts, thousand in number, rushed, electric-like, through the guilt-tortured brain of King Kent; and he drove spurs deeper and more frequent, forcing almost human-like groans from his poor steed—the miscreant having frequent recourse to his brandy flask.

Thus, on, for full five miles. Then he turned his horse abruptly, where the bank was low, and dashed into the river, forcing the animal to swim across.

And the Tonkaway—what of him?

When Turtle dashed away, up the river-bank, leaving Daring Dick at the scene of the attempted assassination, he lingered not to look for "sign" of King Kent's horse. Well the Indian knew that the dastard had dashed up the river at full speed, and would keep within the shades.

He would not dare show himself on the open plain.

The chief forced his horse at speed, on and on,

until a long distance up the river, where the stream ran straight as the course of an arrow.

This was at a point about half a mile from where King Kent took to the stream, to cross the same.

The miscreant had galloped in a wild manner, and had not kept in a direct course parallel with the Brazos. He had dashed, several times, even to the border of the timber, near the open plain; and then, in terror, turned toward the river again.

But the Tonkaway had, knowing every inch of land, taken every advantage; consequently, when King Kent was swimming the stream, the Indian, who dashed purposely down to the water's edge, at the point where, for a long distance up-stream, the Rio Brazos was straight, discovered the terrified wretch, and felt confident that King Kent would proceed down the river, toward his father's ranch, which was on the opposite, or north side, of the stream.

Instantly upon deciding thus, Turtle whirled his horse half-about, and sped through the timber, direct to the south plain.

Afar to the east, he perceived, as he had expected, Daring Dick, loping slowly in the direction of the Rio Leon. Giving a shrill whistle to his mustang, the Tonkaway shot over the prairie toward his white pard; but, luckily, he had not to press his horse hard, for Daring Dick naturally, at times, scanned the plain in his rear, to assure himself that no one was within view—he wishing not to have any one report having seen him, after the attempted assassination, to King Kent, or any of his associates.

Upon discovering Turtle, the young man at once turned his horse, and galloped back to meet his red friend; for, seeing the chief coming at speed after him, he felt positive that the Indian had something of importance to communicate.

The horses of the two were soon side by side.

Daring Dick gazed inquiringly, and with great curiosity, into the face of his red pard, as he said:

"Well, Turtle, what's up now? Have you seen King Kent?"

"Turtle see King Kent. He swim river. Go down on north side. Come."

"Ride fast with Tonkaway chief. King Kent heap scare. He squaw. Turtle paint Dick's face with vermilion. Then Dick, he ride slow in timber, when King Kent go down river."

"King Kent think Dick dead. Think spirit ride in woods. Heap more scare. Then Dick know who shoot. Know Turtle no got forked tongue. It is good. Come. Waugh!"

As the last word left his lips, the Tonkaway galloped back toward the scene of Kent's crime, giving his young friend no time to say a word for or against it.

Daring Dick, however, immediately saw that there was an opening here to terrify his would-have-been murderer to a great degree, and thus, in a measure gain his revenge, besides proving him the cowardly assassin that he was.

He, therefore, rode on after the Tonkaway.

Upon arriving at the timber, Turtle led Dick to the same gully, by which he had carried him from the river, while senseless from his wound.

Both now plunged into the Brazos, and were soon on the opposite bank.

Without delay, the chief began, in a dexterous and skillful manner, to paint his white pard's face, using white gypsum and vermilion; and causing our young friend's visage to have the appearance of being almost covered with blood, and where the skin was free from the same, to be ghastly white.

This done, the Tonkaway stationed him in a thicket, near the path, which was at least two thousand yards from the river; there leaving him to act according to his own discretion, while the chief urged his horse about a hundred yards further up the stream, also secreting himself.

And, none too soon was this accomplished.

Down the path, at headlong speed, came King Kent; his eyes fixed and staring, in the most dread expectation, toward the river.

The villain knew that he was now opposite the scene of his cowardly crime.

Soon he sped past the covert of the chief, and on, toward the river, where Daring Dick was concealed; but, before passing half the distance between our two friends, the horse of King Kent made a sudden halt, with a loud snort and with bulging eyes, nearly hurling his rider over his head.

It was no wonder.

Directly ahead, slowly out from a dense thicket, walked the steed of our young friend, Daring Dick upon his back; the head of the rider held rigid, his eyes staring unnaturally, and his arms hanging listless, and swinging back and forth like those of a corpse. Indeed, he had all the semblance of a dead body bound to a saddle.

Daring Dick presented a truly horrible appearance, there being no indication that life remained.

Most certainly he bore little resemblance to a living, breathing human being.

Never, probably, was there a man more paralyzed with superstitious terror than was King Kent.

He was incapable of either speech or motion, sitting his horse breathless, his tongue cleaving to the roof of his mouth, and his eyes bulging from their sockets, mirroring the horror that ruled his brain.

It was now semi-twilight in the shades, rendering the picture more weird and horrible.

Slowly the horse of Dick, with its terrible burden, walked directly toward King Kent, the eyes of the seeming corpse being frozen upon the face of the murderous miscreant. Thus on he moved, until not more than twenty feet separated them.

Human nature could bear no more.

With one wild, piercing shriek of horror and despair, King Kent jerked his bowie, and plunged the keen blade into the ham of his horse!

With a terrific snort the black steed half-whirled, and bounded, crashing through the undergrowth, toward the north plain.

Then it was that the terrible yell of Turtle, the Tonkaway, rung and echoed, causing the horse of the dastardly wretch to redouble its great exertion and crash forward.

Again and again shot forth the yell of the chief, echoing strange and weird through the natural arches and domes of the timber.

The last our two friends saw of King Kent, he lay forward clutching his saddle-horn, while shriek upon shriek shot from his mouth in superstitious terror and dread despair.

CHAPTER VII.

REACHING HIS RENDEZVOUS.

KNOWLES RANCH was situated on the north bank of the Rio Brazos, and the trail that led from the ranches along the Leon to the Brazos was, for five miles from the latter, something like a mile from the Rio Leon. This last had no ranch upon it for nearly five miles from its confluence with the Brazos; and the timber on both streams, for some distance from their junction, was fully a mile in width, taking in each side of the rivers.

The ford of the Brazos was a mile from the confluence, the banks of both streams where they met being high and steep. Consequently it was a wild and unfrequented spot, seldom visited even by hunters, for the bottom-timber was a mass of tangled vines and undergrowth, dense and thorny.

For some weeks previous to the time of the commencement of our story, there had been many depredations committed along both rivers. Smoke-houses had been robbed of bacon, corn-cribs depleted, and many hogs, calves, and even beeves, killed.

These robberies had been consummated by night; and, high up the Rio Brazos, horses had been stolen. The trails of the thieves had been followed down the river, but always lost, the robbers cunningly outwitting the most skillful scouts.

All this pointed to an organized rendezvous of border bandits, but their abiding-place had never been discovered.

Had the trailers inspected the triangular portion of timber at the junction of the rivers, between the Brazos and Leon, they would have come upon the secret retreat of the outlaw band; but they would have had but little chance of capturing them, and would, without doubt, have lost many of their number; for the bandits were desperate, and would fight to the death.

Quite near the point of land, around which flowed the waters of the Leon into the Brazos, was a natural basin in the earth.* This was full thirty feet in depth, with an opening toward the Rio Leon, and not twenty yards from either stream.

The rivers flowed forty feet below the bank, consequently the basin was dry; and even during heavy rains an underground natural channel from the basin to the Leon served to drain the former.

Huge trees grew on all sides, except at the narrow entrance, through which but one horse could pass at a time; these trees completely screening the chasm from the sun—the vines and undergrowth hanging over on all sides.

About a thousand yards up the Rio Leon from this basin was a natural grass-grown open, which served for pasturage; while wild rye grew in rich luxuriance along the bank of the stream. A more secure retreat from discovery, or one more easily defended, could not have been found in that vicinity of the country; and the same had been taken advantage of, as will be shown. For this was the retreat of the band of outlaws, whose depredations along both rivers had been for some time a source of indignation, as well as of great loss, to the rancheroes.

We will take a glance into this robber retreat, on the night following the day on which King Kent attempted to assassinate Daring Dick.

A huge fire is blazing in the middle of the big basin, revealing the brutal faces of a dozen desperate outlaws—faces that are stamped with dissipation and branded deep with crime.

* Though a natural basin, it had been known from Spanish times as "El Bason," so is locally so called. "The Bason," to this day.

All are roughly appareled in buckskin breeches, woolen shirts and black sombreros.

All are armed with revolvers and the inevitable bowie-knives—these arms being worn at their sides, upon belts.

Their hair is long and tangled, and their clothing rent and soiled.

On the sides of the basin are several cave-like chambers, evidently excavated by the outlaws for sleeping-apartments during storms, and for store-rooms.

Saddles, bridles, blankets, rifles and cooking utensils are scattered promiscuously around the borders of the basin; while an abundance of fish and game hang from pegs that are driven into the walls of hard clay.

The bandits have evidently but just finished eating their evening meal; for, lying indolently upon blankets, reclining or sitting upon saddles, all are enjoying their pipes.

It is but an hour after sunset, but it is quite dark in the bottom-timber, and but for the fire the outlaws could not see a yard before them. Wood there is in plenty, however, besides a huge pile of pine-knots, which can be used if necessary.

One of the bandits, a giant in build, seems to be the leading spirit of the party.

Let us listen, and learn something, if possible, bearing on our story.

The gigantic outlaw is addressed as Big Bill by his comrades, and he now speaks:

"Dog-gone my heart, boyees, ef I ain't git-ter sorter seedy, layin' in this hyer hole! Why, in Tophet, doesn't ther Cap turn up an' show his mug one't in a while? When did yer see King Kent, Crooked Carl?"

"I see'd ther boss last night, an' he war b'ilin' over wi' mad, on 'count o' thet galoot, Darin' Dick, bein' so thick with ole man Landers's darter. I reckon ther Cap 'll do somethin' desprate 'fore soon."

"Shouldn't wonder ef he did," returned Big Bill, blowing a huge cloud of tobacco-smoke from his mouth; "an' I'm eternally cussed ef I keer how speedily he raises ther devil, an' breaks wi' his ole man an' ther ranchers! Hit 'ud be a ormighty good thing for all consarned—thet's we-uns—ef he jist cut a throat, shot somebody without 'lowin' a draw o' pistols, er stoled a hoss an' gut spotted."

"Hit's 'bout time we-uns war levantin' outen this, I'm thinkin'; an' I'd sorter smile ter start towards ole Mex' ter-night."

"Ther Cap 'll take Darin' Dick outen ther wet afore another moon, I reckon," put in another of the band; "but he's gut ter git ther drap, an' pick triggers lively, er he'll claw dirt hisself."

"King Kent aire dead gone on ther colonel's darter, an' I doesn't blame him," said Bill. "He's gut good taste, I'll sw'ar, fer I gut a peep et her through ther winder, t'other night."

"Reckon we-uns 'll hev ter gi'n ther Cap a rifle o' help in ther biz. He's goin' ter corral her some way, bet yer sweet life!"

"He's ez stubborn ez a three-legged mule, an' es dead sot in his ways," said Crooked Carl.

"Thet's what makes me opine he'll jist glide inter Landers Ranch an' scoop her in, without axin' ther ole man," asserted another.

"Didn't he 'low ter glide hyer ter-night, boyees?"

Thus asked Big Bill, seeming to have suddenly been struck with an interesting idea.

"Ya-as," answered Carl; "but thet doesn't count ef he gits chuck full o' brandy. He don't know his own cog then, an' yer can't 'spect him ter 'member 'bout glidin' this-a-ways."

"I 'grees wi' yer, Bill, thet we-uns must skute fer fresh range. Thar ain't nothin' ter be made in this cuss of a country. Ef King Kent hev so much o' his private biz ter 'tend ter, we'll be 'bleeged ter 'lect a new boss, an' everlastin'ly hump ourselves outen these diggin's."

"Wa-al, I shouldn't wonder ef—"

Big Bill was here interrupted by the alarm signal, given by one of the sentinels.

All sprung to their feet, clutching their guns.

All listened intently.

The sounds were those of a horse, coming at full speed toward the basin, from the west.

Soon the crashing of bushes and branches, as of an animal galloping through the undergrowth, met the eager ears of the amazed listeners.

Rifles were clutched and cocked, and then cast into the hollows of their left arms, ready to open fire on the instant.

"Hit's ther Cap, boyees!" cried out Big Bill, excitedly; "I knows hit's him, but he's b'ilin' over wi' terrantaler-juice, an' stud-hoss mad!"

Barely were these words clear of the lips of the giant bandit, when a wild, piercing, and unearthly shriek cut the air.

The outlaws gazed one at another, their faces paling at the horrible sound.

The crashing of undergrowth continued, drawing nearer and nearer.

Near and more near drew the sounds.

Not a man left his tracks.

All stood spellbound.

But the suspense of the bandits was of short duration, for, in a flitting moment of time—although to them it seemed an age, for they realized that something extraordinary was about

to happen, as the sounds indicated the direction from which the rider was approaching—there shot out from the thicket, high over their heads, coming down over the bank of the basin, a coal-black horse, quivering in every limb, as it sprung through the air, and upon the back of this steed was a man.

It was King Kent, and he was a raving maniac, from the combined effects of terror and brandy.

Straight out from the fringe of bushes, over the high bank, thirty feet above the heads of the appalled outlaws, shot man and mustang!

King Kent was shrieking in a horrible manner, and with an intonation expressive of deathly despair and dread terror. Then down, down, with the velocity of a projectile from a catapult, fell the pair, the animal striking the hard bed of the basin with terrible force and sickening sound—its bones snapping and crashing, while the poor beast uttered a cry that was almost human, its last outcry, for the noble animal's head dropped, with a heavy thud, upon the floor of the chasm, its large, intelligent eyes filming in death!

King Kent was hurled afar, over the head of his horse; but, fortunately for him—or, *unfortunately*, we should rather say—he struck upon a pile of blankets, which broke his fall, and undoubtedly saved his miserable life; saved, that he might work further evil to others, and still longer curse the earth.

There the assassin lay, to all appearances dead.

King Kent, the young ranchero—the gambler, desperado, and, as we now know, bandit chief—had kept his word to his men.

He had returned to the basin, and his followers.

But, ye gods, what a return it was!

CHAPTER VIII.

A DESPERATE SCHEME.

ROUGH and desperate outlaws though they were, the Bandits of the Basin were appalled at the strange and startling advent of their chief; and not a man, for a moment or two, stirred from his position, after King Kent struck the pile of blankets.

All stood breathless, staring at the form of their young leader, whom they believed to be dead.

From the first alarm, until the horse and its rider lay upon the basin bed, it had been but a few moments; consequently the spectators were dazed, and no wonder.

Big Bill was the first to recover.

The giant heaved a deep sigh, and then exclaimed:

"Great Jerusalem!"

He then strode quickly to the side of King Kent, and rolled him over; the others looking on, in astonished silence.

With a practiced hand, Big Bill examined Kent, to ascertain if any bones were broken. He next felt his pulse, and placed his ear close to his left breast.

Then striding to the dead horse, and tearing open the saddle-bags, he jerked out the brandy-flask.

Removing the cork, he found the bottle to be empty.

"Skute, Crooked Carl, and fotch some liquor! Ther Cap gut b'ilin' over, an'then gut out o' p'ison, an' run wild es a hungry black wolf. He ain't much hurted, an' we'll fotch him 'roun', but he's killed ther bestest nag in Texas, which air onlucky."

"Dang me, ef I likes this biz. I ain't over much bothered with superstitious, but this sorter sots me back. Reckon we'll hev ter take a new deck, an' gi'n her a hefty shuffle, an' change ther game ter cut-throat."

"Wonder whar in ther dickens King Kent hev bin, an' what he's been doin'. Hit ain't all brandy, boyees—not by a jug-full! Thet's hunk, Carl; now we'll see ef he'll flop 'roun' ter biz, arter primin' him wi' whisk'. Fotch some water, an' we'll soak his cabase."

Bill immediately raised the head of his leader, and poured a quantity of the whisky, brought by Crooked Carl, down his throat.

This nearly strangled Kent, but soon he swallowed naturally, and half opened his eyes; although the lids were so slowly moved as to be hardly perceptible, the sufferer having apparently little control over his muscles.

The face of King Kent was like that of the dead.

He evidently had no knowledge of his condition, or surroundings.

"Thar ain't no use 'spectin' ter git any squar' lingo outen him," asserted Big Bill. "Mebbe sother water'll fotch him 'roun' seein' hit'll be a new drink fer him. We'll gi'n his stum-jack a surprise-party."

The giant chuckled at his own wit, while the others all laughed; for they felt greatly relieved to find that King Kent was really alive.

At this moment, two canteens of water were produced, and Bill at once turned one of them upside down, over the face and head of King Kent; pouring water copiously over him, and some into his mouth. The miscreant closed his eyes, and his face expressed satisfaction.

Another drink of whisky was administered, and then the second canteen of water was made use of.

King Kent, a moment after, seemed to recover sufficiently to recall the near past to mind.

He gazed around upon the familiar faces, and then sprung to his feet, clapping his hands to his brow; while he turned, as on a pivot, staring upward, and scanning the border of bushes on all sides of the basin. His eyes, at length, rested upon his dead horse. Then all that had been cloudy seemed to become clear to him.

He sprung to the side of Big Bill, clutching the arm of the giant bandit, and gazing wildly in his face; as he cried out, in a hoarse and unnatural voice:

"Bill, have you ever seen a ghost—a spook, an apparition?"

The big bandit laughed heartily, yet there was that in his eyes which contradicted the laugh, and proved that he was superstitiously inclined.

"Ya-as, I've see'd a heap on 'em, Cap'; but they never hurt me. Why, hes yer bin chased by sperits? Spit out ther hull thing, boss! Hit's a ormighty serious thing ter see sperits, an' hev 'em run yer."

"Reckon yer critter gut a peep et 'em, er hit wouldn't ha' lunged over ther high bank, an' killed hitself. Whar, in thunderation, yer bin meanderin'?"

King Kent released his hold on Big Bill and began walking back and forth, circling his arms wildly; while his gaze was fixed straight ahead, as though he saw some dread sight, that filled him with horror. At length he halted, and again spoke.

All his men had watched him with interest, and in silence—all greatly puzzled, and impressed, more or less superstitiously, by what they had heard.

It was truly a wild scene.

"I've killed him! I've shot Daring Dick!" thus yelled the bandit chief. "I shot him, and his body is now floating down the Brazos. But, for all that, he appeared to me in the timber, riding his own horse, and his face was covered with blood."

"He chased me, and a hundred demons shrieked in my ears, on the trail. I rode for my life! What shall I do to be rid of the spirit of Daring Dick? Can we not watch the river, recover the corpse, and burn it? Will not that lay the ghost?"

Big Bill stroked his beard reflectively.

Perhaps there was not one of these outlaws, who had not killed his man in a cowardly manner, and who had not been, in his imagination, haunted by his victim; consequently, there was not one to ridicule the assertions of either Big Bill, or King Kent.

All believed that their captain had been chased by the ghost of his victim; they being all the more impressed with the idea, from the fact that they were all tapering off, after a long debauch.

"I reckon Darin' Dick air catfish bait by this. He'd lodge onder some drift. Whar 'bouts did yer plug him, Cap'?"

"About ten miles up the Brazos, in a bee-line. I've been riding wild, all over the country, since then."

"Then thar ain't no use ter look inter ther drink arter him. He'll come slow, ef he doesn't lodge. Reckon yer'll hev ter levant outen this locate, ef yer've bin, an' gone, an' done hit."

"Did he git a show ter pick triggers wi' yer?"

King Kent again began to pace up and down, being evidently taken aback by the question.

He knew it would not do to assert that Daring Dick had fired at him, for he had no wounds to show, and Dick was the crack shot of that section of the country.

He also knew that he must confide in the outlaws, who had but recently chosen him as their leader.

It would not do to deceive them in any single particular.

His whole future—yes, his very life—depended upon their loyalty to him.

Never again would he dare show himself at his home, or among the ranches of the Brazos and the Leon. He was now as much an outlaw as any in the band.

He had thrust his neck into the noose of a lariat, so to speak; and henceforth, outside of these rough outlaws, every man's hand would be turned against him. Under these circumstances, there was but one course to pursue.

He would bind the band to him, in every possible way.

And King Kent was not without his plans in connection with Lola Landers.

He realized that he must fly with the band of men who were around him, and who had placed their lives in his hands in the past, by trusting implicitly in him, even to the extent of choosing him as their leader.

He would fly with the band, southward, toward the Rio Grande.

But he would not give up the one dream of his life. Lola Landers should bear him company!

He would abduct the maiden at once.

The band were dissatisfied, he well knew. They had long been wishing to change the scene of their operations.

They would also want gold, when they reached a point where they were unknown.

He would rob his father, who, as he knew, had gold in plenty, buried in his cellar.

His father, he never expected to see again.

There was no love between them, and Kent must have gold, to bribe the men to do his personal service.

He now halted, crying out, at once:

"Boys, I shot Daring Dick from a thicket! I knew I had no show, if he once pulled on me. I am an outlaw! I have banished myself from home, and friends, and civilization, by the act of yesterday."

"We are all in the same box, and I propose to lead you toward Mexico, to new fields. But, first, I shall give you gold. I'll rob my own father, for you; then you'll help me corral old Landers's daughter, and we'll be fixed. When this is done, we'll levant south."

Every sombrero was hurled into the air, and the basin rung with wild cheers for King Kent—for Captain Kent, the chief of the Basin Bandits!

A moment later, a low-browed, villainous-looking Mexican galloped into the basin, and was welcomed by a yell.

King Kent rushed to the Greaser's side, crying out, while all gathered around:

"What do they say at the ranch, Antonio, about the absence of Daring Dick?"

"Senor, Daring Dick is at Rancho Landers. I saw him walking with Senorita Lola!"

Had a hundred-pound shell rolled into the basin and burst, killing all except himself, King Kent would not have been more amazed.

He stood with his mouth agape for a moment, then, with grating teeth, he asked:

"Antonio, are you sure of this?"

"Antonio both saw and spoke with Daring Dick."

"When did he arrive from up the Brazos?"

"When the sun was two hours from setting."

"Was he alone?"

"No, senor."

"Who, in Heaven's name, was with him?"

"Turtle, senor, the Tonkaway."

"By the fiends, I see it all now!" roared King

Kent, clutching the whisky-bottle and drinking heavily from it. "My bullet must have glanced. I was a fool—an infernal idiot!"

"It was the Tonkaway's yell I heard, and he saved Daring Dick from the river. He painted him up, and when I was crazed with liquor, caused him to appear to me."

"By all the gods, this is terrible! It is worse than if I had really killed him. He'll blow on me, and I'll be run out of the country, or hanged!"

"That infernal Dick will shoot me like a dog! But, by Heavens, no! I'll win the game yet. Antonio, I'll give you a hundred pesos to stampede the horses of Colonel Landers across the Colorado to the San Saba."

"Antonio will do it, Senor Capitan!"

"Hurrah, boys! That will cause Daring Dick to follow the stampede to recover the nags. Then we can abduct the girl, gallop to the San Saba, and corral Mr. Dick Robinson."

"I'll make sure of him next time. You shall all have gold to-morrow, do you hear? I'll rob Knowles Ranch to get it!"

Again the chasm resounded with wild cheers.

Whisky was procured, and a general carouse was at once commenced, King Kent recovering, as the liquor stimulated his brain.

CHAPTER IX.

FEARS FOR THE FUTURE.

AFTER the flight of King Kent from the Brazos river-bottom, Daring Dick and the Tonkaway rejoined each other; but the stoical Indian expressed not in any way the satisfaction he felt at the success of his scheme.

"Turtle," said Dick, "I would not be in that man's place, and suffer the tortures of mind that he is enduring, for all the gold in the Rocky Mountains."

"Drink heap brandy. Bad spirit-water make head wild. Mebbe so take his own scalp."

"He does seem to be in a state to commit suicide," agreed the young Texan. "But now, what shall I do? I propose washing off my war-paint, and returning to the ranch. You must go with me; the colonel and Lola wish to see you."

"We will not say anything about King Kent's cowardly act at present. We must first see what he proposes to do. When he finds out that I am alive and unharmed, he will be too frightened to commit any more devilment for a time, I reckon, for fear I will expose him."

"If I meet him in the company of others, I'll force him to fight; and I have no fears of the result. I shall not kill him, but I'll maim him for life, in payment for his dastardly attempt to shoot me. Will you go with me to the ranch, Turtle?"

"Turtle will go to ranch," was the laconic reply.

Daring Dick then guided his horse up the river-bank, and proceeded to wash off the paint. The Tonkaway dismounted, allowing his mustang to graze on the wild rye, while he stood erect, and gazed into the waters.

"What are you thinking about, my red

pard?" inquired Dick, as he finished removing the paint.

"My white brother no like Turtle," was the reply. "Turtle have enemy, kill, scalp. King Kent bad white man, heap bad. King Kent like panther. Hide in tree. Jump down on my white brother. Comanche heap bad. King Kent, he more heap bad. Waugh!"

"You are right, Turtle, but I am not afraid of him. I know his real character now. But why do you bear such hatred toward the Comanches? You must have good grounds for it."

The breast of the Tonkaway swelled outward, his breath came and went in long-drawn throes, a look of fierce hatred flashed from his eyes, and his fingers clutched the handle of his scalping-knife, as the bright blade shot from its scabbard.

"Turtle have squaw, have pappoose. Turtle love squaw, love pappoose," he exclaimed, with intense fire and fury. "Turtle go hunt buffalo. Many warriors go. Come back to village when moon big. Go on hunt when moon small."

"Squaw gone. Pappoose, he gone. See Comanche trail. Go on trail. Find torture-stake. Squaw dead. Pappoose dead. Heap stones at stake. Stones all blood. Comanche stone squaw. Stone pappoose. Both dead. Both lose scalp."

"Then Turtle call on Great Spirit. Great Spirit see what Comanche do. Turtle do what Great Spirit say. Look,"—pointing at the many scalps on his belt and leggins—"heap scalp here. Heap more on Comanche head. Turtle will have more. Belt must hang heavy."

"War-path open, always open. War-cry on Turtle lips. When sound death-yell, then no more scalp Comanche. It is good. Waugh!"

As the chief ended, he gave the terrible war-whoop of his tribe; at the same time, circling his knife in his right, and his scalp-trimmed quiver in his left hand, around his plumed head.

"I do not blame you for your implacable hatred," said Daring Dick, as he extended his hand; "God knows you have been greatly wronged by those pirates of the plains; and, if I ever have a chance, I'll send a few bullets among them, on your account. I can never forget what you have done for me, and your noble friendship generally."

"Daring Dick take care Turtle when Comanche arrow in leg. Turtle no forget. My white brother give Turtle gun"—pointing to his rifle.

"When Daring Dick have enemy, Turtle shoot, scalp. When my white brother say, King Kent die, Turtle kill with rifle. King Kent my white brother enemy. King Kent bad as rattlesnake, bad as tarantula, bad as centipede. Waugh!"

"Thanks, my red pard; but I can do my own shooting, as you are well aware. I'll keep a sharp lookout for him hereafter, rest assured. But I fear him not. Indeed I do not believe he will remain in this section another day."

Little did Daring Dick think how greatly he would regret not taking the advice of the Turtle, and rid the earth of the miscreant who had attempted his life. Little did he think of the anguish of soul, the torture of both mind and body, that would be occasioned by this despicable villain.

However, the words of the Indian seemed to have impressed the young man greatly, for he said but little after swimming the river; and the two friends sped over the plain, southeast, to Landers Ranch.

Before reaching the ranch, a bright vision greeted them.

This was Lola Landers, who rode out to meet them, upon a milk-white pony of most graceful build; the animal seeming to have been especially created for its lovely mistress.

Over the prairie it sped, through grass and flowers; disturbing and distributing the perfume of the leaves and buds, which filled the atmosphere with its fragrance.

The fair girl was attired in a riding-habit, of some light fabric, a delicate shade of blue; and a pink sash was about her waist. Into this sash was thrust a small sized Colt's revolver and a dagger—arms that seemed ill-fitted for such an angelic maiden.

"I am rejoiced to see you return so soon," she said, addressing Dick; "I did not expect you until quite late. Why, you look fatigued!"

Lola then urged her white pony to the side of the noble black steed of the Indian.

Both the latter and Daring Dick had halted.

The neck of the Tonkaway's horse was proudly arched, its black eyes glittering, and fixed upon the little steed of Lola Landers.

No grander and more warlike tableau could well be imagined, than the Tonkaway upon his glossy ebony steed, thus surrounded.

All in all, the picture on the prairie, illuminated by the blood-red declining sun, and framed in by verdure and various colored flowers, was one to entrance an artist, and chain the attention of the most stupid dolt in Christendom.

The love light in Lola's eyes gave place to the deepest respect and regard, as she rode up beside the chief, and placed her little hand in his great bronzed palm, which was immediately extended to her. The Indian leaned over in his saddle, until his eagle-plumes kissed the pink

cheek of the maiden. No sound left his lips, but his stern features softened, and the habitual fierceness in his black eyes vanished, to give place to a worshipful regard, blended with something akin to awe and reverence.

"Turtle, the Tonkaway, is welcome," said Lola, in her silvery voice. "He has long been a stranger in the lodge of his friends on the Leon."

"My father will be glad to grasp his hand. Turtle is our red brother. He is brave, and his heart is pure. Lola forgets not that he saved her life, on the Brazos, when the panther was about to spring upon, and tear her to pieces."

As a compliment, and in delicate consideration for the chief, Lola strove to speak in an Indian-like manner, when addressing the brave; and this was always appreciated by him.

"The words of the Lily of Leon are sweet as the song of birds in the ears of Turtle," returned the Tonkaway. "The heart of the Tonkaway chief swells in his breast, when he looks in her face and hears the voice of the Lily."

"The Great Spirit has smiled upon her and given her the beauty of His sky-children. He has caused the sun to leave its fire in her hair. Turtle's skin is red, but his heart is warm toward Lily of Leon, and his arm is strong to slay her enemies."

"Wolves are on the prairies. They trample on the flowers. Birds that sing and please the eye fly in the bushes, but the cunning snake charms and swallows them. Turtle will drive the wolves and snakes from trail of Lily of Leon."

"She pleases the eye more than flowers and birds. I have spoken, and lies build no nests on the tongue of Turtle, the Tonkaway."

"You seem apprehensive of danger to me, Turtle," said Lola, who was accustomed to the ways and language of the chief. "Have you crossed the trails of any Comanches?"

"Comanches will not come. Trails on south of Colorado."

"Then what does my red brother mean?"

"The eyes of Turtle are open, and he can see the buzzard in the trail of the sun. It is enough. When the black wolf howls at lodge of Lily of Leon, Turtle will hear him, and his arrows fly swift, sure and far. I have spoken."

"Thanks, Turtle! I could have no more brave and skillful protector. But come; let us ride on to the ranch."

The eyes of the Indian swept the prairie while he allowed his horse to proceed, Lola riding between the chief and Dick, the latter having watched the interview and listened to the words that had been spoken with much concern.

In spite of his own reasonings to the contrary, Daring Dick became, through the influence of his red pard, apprehensive of some danger, the character of which he could not for his life determine or even guess; and regardless of the presence of Lola, he became somewhat gloomy.

The trio soon reached the ranch, the chief being kindly and considerably welcomed and entertained by the colonel; while Dick and Lola took a lover-like promenade, before retiring, beneath the shades of the bottom-timber, which, for some distance from the ranch, had been trimmed and cleared partly from the undergrowth, thus forming beautiful walks overhung with moss and flowering vines.

And while thus walking they were seen by Antonio, the traitor Mexican, as well as when they rode in with Turtle from the prairie.

Lola questioned Dick in regard to the words of the chief in connection with danger to herself, but the young man could see no real grounds for alarm connected with King Kent—the only person he could think of through whom danger would be likely to emanate. This quieted the maiden's apprehensions, and all retired early, Dick taking the Tonkaway to his chamber to dress his wound. Then the latter spread his blanket beneath the trees, scorning to repose under a roof.

Little dreamed Colonel Landers, Lola, and Daring Dick, that this was to be the last night of peace and security they would pass, for a long time—that horrors and terrors, anguish and despair, privation and torture of brain and body, almost beyond human endurance, was to be the lot of all!

Was the Tonkaway chief gifted with a power to pierce the future, that he appeared so strange and apprehensive; and that he should have gazed, with so much mingled pity and adoration, upon his fair young hostess, as his eyes last rested upon the LILY OF LEON?

CHAPTER X.

MURDER MOST FOUL.

THE bandit band, after their chief had declared his future plans, kept up their carouse for an hour; after which, Antonio was dispatched to effect a stampede of the horses of Colonel Landers.

King Kent then asserted, that his father was the only man within two hundred miles, who had any extra money; and that he knew where the old man had buried it, although the latter did not suspect his knowledge.

The depravity of the villain, in thus proposing to impoverish his aged father, for their benefit, shocked even the lawless men whom he had,

through crime, become associated with; but, as they were to be benefited by the robbery, they smothered their disgust and contempt, with the aid of liquor, and made no comments.

The whisky that King Kent had swallowed since his arrival, together with the knowledge gained from Antonio, in regard to his supposed victim—all this had cleared his brain, and brought him to a more natural state of mind.

He was resolved to rob his father, abduct Lola Landers, and live the life of a bandit chief!

He congratulated himself upon having, a few weeks previous, discovered this retreat of the outlaws, unknown to them; and that he had ridden boldly into it without a show of fear, demanding they receive him as a friend, who would assist them by acting as their spy.

He had an object in this.

He knew that the Vigilantes had already an eye on him, and that they were eager to give him a Judge Lynch "send off," on account of homicides he had committed; and for cheating men out of large sums at cards, when those who were playing with him were intoxicated—dragged by himself!

Proofs were all that the committee wanted; and he would, some night, suddenly disappear, to be found hanging from the limb of a tree. Under these circumstances, he was fortunate in being able to league himself with the Basin Bandits.

Accompanied by two of his followers, all well armed, he crossed the ford, and passed down the north side of the Brazos, to his home—but which was to be a home to him no longer—which he was now about to enter as a midnight thief!

Why did the Fates not warn him back?

Because they had ordained it.

They were cruel—mercilessly cruel!

Every step forward of King Kent's horse was a curse on his head, and heart and soul.

Yet he dreamed not of the full extent of the crime he was about to perpetrate.

But, we anticipate.

King Kent knew that the bloodhounds belonging to himself and his father would be furious at the approach of strangers—indeed, that they would be dangerous. He, therefore, bade his comrades remain at some distance from the ranch until he went forward, pacified the dogs, and brought the pack back to make them acquainted, and insure safety in that quarter.

To this the pair of bandits readily agreed.

It being night, it was no easy matter to make friends with the hounds, and had not Big Bill had the forethought to bring a huge piece of meat, secured to his saddle-cantle, and which he and Crooked Carl fed to the fierce brutes, matters would have been more complicated.

With the exception of a negro body-servant, Captain Knowles was usually alone in the house; but there was an old Auntie and several other negroes, who lived in cabins quite near the main dwelling. This latter was an exception to Texas houses in general. It had a cellar, although the excavation was small, being under the rear portion of the house. There was but one window, and this not very large; but King Kent assured Big Bill that he could squeeze through easily.

The miscreant also asserted that his father was always full of brandy when he retired, and that he slept like a top.

Without a word further, this being spoken in a whisper near the front veranda, King Kent led the way to one of the negro cabins, where he procured two spades. Soon the trio were at the cellar window.

This was securely fastened, but the woodwork was somewhat decayed, and they opened it readily.

Igniting a pine knot, which they had brought for the purpose, King Kent thrust one end in the earth of the cellar bottom, and then pointing to a wooden platform beneath a hanging closet, he gave his comrades to understand that it must be lifted away.

This was easily accomplished.

Upon removing the platform, the earth was observed to be loose, as if recently disturbed, and King gave an audible and vicious curse, seizing a spade, however, and beginning to dig. The earth was fast removed, and soon an iron box was exposed to view. Rushing to one corner of the cellar, and reaching up to a joist, the delectable Kent muttered another deep curse.

"The old gent has taken the key away," he whispered. "We'll have to take the box out and blow it up."

"That's easy did," returned Big Bill.

The giant bandit, so saying, jerked the box from the hole, and carried it toward the window. Just then the hounds rushed up; some of them gazing down into the cellar. Then down went the window with a crash, overturned by one of the animals, the dog whining as the sash fell upon its foot.

At that instant down the cellar stairs sprang Captain Knowles, in his night-shirt, with a revolver in his hand; firing point-blank, in the uncertain light, at Big Bill, who hurled the box through the window, and scrambled after—Crooked Carl close at his heels, and both thinking only of escape.

The captain then sprang from the stairs into the cellar, and began to yell and shout.

Kent became insane with rage.

If captured, he knew that his father would have no mercy. This thought maddened him.

With a fiendish yell, he jerked his pistol, and fired directly at his father's breast; not six feet separating them at the time.

With a groan of mortal agony, the old man tottered a moment, and then fell to the cellar floor.

King Kent stood appalled, his smoking pistol in his hand.

"In God's name, what hes yer bin, an' gone, an' did?"

Thus asked Big Bill, through the window.

"By ther blood o' Crockett, ther Cap hev shooted his own dad!" burst from Crooked Carl.

Kent stood, as if paralyzed.

"My curse, a father's curse, be on you, living and dead, Kent Knowles!"

These words, in a strange and unnatural voice, came from the lips of Captain Knowles, as he struggled to a reclining position, and pointed a trembling finger at his son.

Then the old man fell backward upon the floor.

Captain Knowles was dead—robbed and murdered by his own son!

King Kent was a parricide!

"Come on, Cap! Ther niggers air rumpus-sin'. Yer can't help ther ole man now. He's dead es a door-nail, an' I wouldn't be in yer shoes fer all ther gold in Californy!"

Thus exclaimed Big Bill, catching up the box, and running from the ranch.

Kent Knowles was alone with his father's corpse, in the cellar of the home he had cursed.

But, only for a moment, stood he thus.

With one wild and piercing shriek of deadly terror, he shot through the window like a madman; the pack of hounds following fast at his heels, and filling the air with their howls; while, back at the ranch, screams and yells resounded from the affrighted negroes.

King Kent slackened not his speed, until he arrived at the motte, when he fell at the feet of Big Bill and Crooked Carl, as senseless as the corpse of the father he had murdered, now lying in the cellar of Knowles Ranch.

Neither of the bandits paid the slightest attention to their unconscious chief, but proceeded to pour powder into the lock of the iron box.

Soon there followed a loud explosion, and thousands of eagles and double-eagles were exposed to their amazed and delighted view. These were hastily placed in their saddle-bags, and then they poured whisky over the head, and into the mouth of King Kent, who partially recovered; when they placed him upon his horse, with a whisky-bottle in his hand.

And, not far had they ridden, when the parricide halted, placed the bottle to his lips, and drank the contents, to the last drop.

Hurling the empty bottle from him, King Kent drove deep his spurs, and his horse sprang into the air, and then shot toward the Brazos ford; the robber and parricide, the dastardly midnight assassin, shooting shriek after shriek through the night, causing the coyotes to cease their yelps, and slink away to their hiding-places in the thickets!

Surely "the way of the transgressor is hard."

CHAPTER XI.

THE STOCK STAMPEDE.

THE day following that during which Daring Dick and his would-have-been assassin both were so near to death, was fated to be an eventful one to all of our leading characters.

Antonio, the traitorous Greaser, lost no time in carrying out the directions of King Kent, his chief, for the Mexican, although engaged as a *vaquero* by Colonel Landers, belonged to the Basin Bandits.

Little thought either Daring Dick or Turtle that while they had peacefully slept, King Kent had robbed and murdered his own father. And neither were they to hear this fearful news, as will be shown.

Had Dick known of this most fiendish and unnatural deed, it is doubtful whether he would have left Landers Ranch, even had all the cattle stampeded with the horses. But he ought to have known from the experiences of the day previous that King Kent was an unscrupulous villain, a cowardly dastard, who would not hesitate at any crime, however heinous.

And knowing this, and considering that the miscreant looked with love and favor upon Lola Landers—that he had associated in a friendly way with the Landers family previous to Dick's advent at the ranch—knowing this, he ought to have felt considerable concern in connection with the safety of Lola herself.

The manner and the language of the Tonkaway ought also to have had more weight and consideration with him, although it was evident that the chief entertained only suspicions.

Daring Dick attributed the words and manner of Turtle to the dissatisfaction entertained by his red pard, on account of his not having been permitted to shoot King Kent down on sight after the attempted assassination.

Lola, too, was to be censured, for not having confided to her lover the forced interview she had had with Kent, his proposal of marriage.

and the threats used by him upon her rejection of his suit.

But Lola feared that, if she revealed this, her lover would be furious, and seek a meeting with King Kent with hostile weapons.

The time was near, however, when the maiden would deeply regret not having informed her father and Daring Dick of the insulting threats that had been made in her presence.

And the time was near, also, when both the young Texan and the Tonkaway would deeply regret not having shot the dastard in his tracks, in place of merely giving him a fright.

But to return.

We have mentioned that Antonio, the traitor Greaser, lost no time in doing the bidding of King Kent.

The Mexican bribed one of his comrades to go to the ranch in the morning, and report the stampeding of the horses. This was to make sure of the following after them of Daring Dick, thus leaving the ranch unprotected, except by the colonel, who seldom remained at home.

Not only this, but Dick would be far from any ranches on the San Saba, and as the Basin Bandits were intending to start at once for the same point, there would be a fine opportunity to shoot Dick, and no one would ever know what had become of him.

Antonio planned and executed all this well; for he had the herd of horses on a wild stampede toward the Colorado at midnight, or about the same time that Captain Knowles was shot by his worthless son.

Antonio followed up the Rio Leon for a long distance, and then, with the assistance of two of his fellow *vaqueros* whom he induced to go with him, the herd was headed off, forced over the Leon, and on toward the Lampasas Hills, in a southwesterly direction.

Full fifty miles had the stampede been forced, when the sun arose, giving Antonio a safe start, and beyond the probability of being overtaken.

Daring Dick and Turtle were conversing on the veranda, after breakfast, both having enjoyed a refreshing sleep. The Tonkaway was proposing to mount his horse, and start off on a lone scout, when he and his white pard perceived one of the *vaqueros*, coming at headlong gallop, over the prairie, toward the ranch.

At first neither of them paid any attention to the approaching Greaser, as the Mexicans generally galloped at full speed at all times, whether there was any occasion for it or not.

Lola had been out early, as was her wont, and had gathered a quantity of beautiful prairie flowers. She had playfully decorated Dick's sombrero with these, and also the fillet and quiver of Turtle.

She was now singing merrily, in her own apartment, while the red and white pards were conversing, both at times pausing in their talk, to listen to her silvery, melodious voice.

As the Mexican drew nearer, Daring Dick and Turtle saw that he was much excited, for he was waving his sombrero, to attract their attention.

Both men stepped from the veranda, and hastened to meet him.

Soon the Greaser galloped up beside our friends, and jerked his horse to his haunches.

"Well, Pedro, what is the difficulty?" asked Dick, quickly.

The *vaquero* would have spoken first, but his attention was attracted by the Tonkaway chief, whose presence at the ranch he was ignorant of.

Probably he feared that the Indian would accompany Dick on the trail of the stampede, and would read the "sign" correct, knowing that the horses had been driven off the range, in place of having stampeded from fright, as he intended to represent.

However, there was no time to concoct another story, and he must run the risk.

"Senor Dick," answered the Greaser, "the horses have all stampeded up the Leon!"

"When did this happen?" demanded the young man anxiously.

"Last night, senor."

"Where were you, Pedro?"

"Camped toward the Brazos."

"Did you know of the stampede before this morning?"

"No, senor."

"Where are the boys?"

"On the trail of the horses."

"How know you this?"

"Only by following the trail a few miles myself, senor."

"Then you were not near when the stampede occurred?"

"I was miles away, senor."

"That will do, Pedro. Go back, and mind you do not allow the cattle to stray off the range."

"Si, Senor Dick; I know my duty."

And touching his sombrero brim, the Greaser galloped away on his return over the prairie.

"Turtle," said our hero, quickly; "this is serious business. I must follow the stampede, and it will not do to inform the colonel, as it would worry him greatly. He prizes those breed mares very highly. Will you go with me?"

"Turtle will go with his white brother."

"Thanks. Your company will be very agreeable to me. I will speak to Lola a minute, and then be with you. We will start at once."

Daring Dick hastened into the house, the chief striding to where his horse was staked, and proceeding at once to equip the animal.

At the low mention of her name at the foot of the stairs, Lola Landers came tripping down, and, as no one was within view, she clasped her arms about the neck of her lover as she stood upon the lower step, saying, in her sweetest tones:

"Well, darling Dick; what can Lola do for you?"

The young man impulsively folded the angelic girl in his strong arms, pressing kisses upon her brow, and trembling with the intensity of his passionate love and adoration. Then he spoke:

"Lola, I must leave you for a time. The horses, I have just learned, have all stampeded, and I must follow and head them off, driving them back on the range."

"Oh, dear! Don't you go, Dick. Can't the Mexicans attend to the horses? That is the service they are paid for. Don't go, darling!"

"I shall be so lonely, and I have a presentiment of coming danger. I know it is foolish, and unreasonable, but I cannot drive away the apprehension I have felt since I had that conversation with Turtle, the Tonkaway."

"That is strange, Lola. I never knew you were so easily influenced or impressed. But, fear not. I shall soon return—to-morrow, or the next day; perhaps, indeed, to-night."

"You are perfectly safe here, and ought not to bother your little head with idle fears. The Tonkaway has a spell of the blues, I reckon."

"Oh, I can't help worrying, although I can give no reason for it. Perhaps some danger will befall you on this trail. You may be killed, and then what would I do?"

The fair girl burst into tears.

"Lola, I am astonished," said the young man. "You are not well, I fear. Do not cry, for you will cause me great anxiety and concern when on the trail. Do dry your tears, dear, and say good-by."

"Don't tell your father anything about the stampede, for it will cause him needless worry. That's a darling,"—kissing her, as she smiled sweetly through her tears—"now I shall feel less apprehension in regard to you. Are you really unwell, Lola?"

"Oh, no, Dick! Just a little tiny mite of the blues—that is all. It is of no consequence. Don't mind me. If you must go, please come back as soon as you can. Won't you, dear?"

"Most certainly, Lola! The attraction here is too strong for me to remain absent any longer than is absolutely necessary. By-by, darling!"

"Good-by, Dick!"

And thus this handsome pair, who adored each other, parted; little dreaming of the horrors and torture of mind and body each was fated to suffer before again they should gaze into each other's eyes.

Daring Dick at once equipped his horse, and, accompanied by the Tonkaway chief, galloped up the Rio Leon to strike the trail of the stampede—a trail that would lead them far from Landers Ranch, into dangers most deadly, and bring tortures to Daring Dick such as he had never thought of in his wildest imaginings, or dreamed of in his most unreasonable visions of the future.

CHAPTER XII.

THE NEWS AT THE RANCH.

LOLA LANDERS stepped out upon the veranda for a few moments, after taking leave of Daring Dick, and with tear-dimmed eyes watched him and the Tonkaway chief as they galloped over the prairie, parallel with the Rio Leon, in a southwest direction.

Until they were two mere dots on the far-off plain Lola gazed after them. Then, as she was about re-entering the house, she discovered, to the north, riding toward the ranch, and but a short distance away, Mickey McCafferty, who had for some days been absent on a mission down the Rio Brazos for the colonel.

Mickey was mounted upon a mule, and by his side rode a young lady.

Lola's lovely face brightened with joy and relief, for she recognized the fair equestrienne as Edna Edwards, the daughter of a ranchero on the Brazos, and with whom she was quite intimate.

Lola was overjoyed to see her friend coming.

Edna would be company for her during the absence of Daring Dick, for well Lola knew that her father would not be content to remain at home, especially as some of the cattle had strayed across the Brazos, and Dick, who had gone the previous day to seek the same, had failed to find them.

We already know why the young man was unable to continue the search.

Mickey McCafferty presented a most comical appearance, he persisting in wearing an old battered "stove-pipe," or "plug" hat, which he had found stored away in a loft, and which the colonel had worn in former days.

This hat Mickey wore, jammed hard on the back of his head, his stiff, coarse, sandy hair bristling on all sides, his beard, as he rode up, being fully a week's growth, and giving him a most untidy appearance.

His complexion was naturally florid, but the sun had scorched and tanned his skin a deep, dark red; in fact, it was blistered in many places.

His eyes were small, his brows beetling, and his nose a decided pug.

A blue woolen shirt, buttonless at the bosom, and flowing open, displayed his hairy, sun-burnt breast. Buckskin leggings and stoga boots completed his attire.

He wore a belt taken from a portion of a mule harness, and upon the same were, in scabbards, an old rusty revolver, and a bowie-knife.

The pistol was useless beyond a doubt, and worn merely to be in the fashion of the frontier.

The mule he rode was a scraggy animal, most appropriate to the rider; its coat of hair being rough, the ears of the beast huge and long, and hanging listlessly. The animal's nose nearly touched the ground as it walked, while its eyes were half-closed in a sleepy manner. Its motions were indolence personified; for it paid no attention to the violent whacking of a club, with which Mickey belabored it, being seemingly unconscious of the blows.

Edna Edwards was a sprightly brunette with bright, sparkling eyes, long dark curls, slender in build, agile and energetic. Indeed she was overflowing with life and good spirits; just the person to drive away dull care, or a fit of the blues, from those who were favored with her companionship.

Edna was a beauty, in every sense of the word, but of the very opposite type to her friend.

"Oh, Edna! I am so glad you have come," cried out Lola, impulsively, joy beaming upon her angelic face. "Dick has gone away in search of the horses, and papa, I know, will ride to the Brazos; which would have left me lonely indeed, had you not taken a notion to ride up the Leon. How have you been?"

"Just lovely, Lola! I always am, you know. But I shall enjoy myself more here than at home. It is decidedly dull there."

"I'm sorry Dick is away, however, for I depended on him to go fishing with us; but Mickey will make a jolly companion. He has kept me laughing all the way."

"How do you do, Mickey?" said his young mistress. "Excuse my neglect, but Miss Edna took up my attention. You have been away a long time, and I am glad you have returned in safety."

"But what is the matter with you? You look despondent. Are you ill?"

"Upon me sowl, it's sick in me moind, I am, Miss Lola; an' I'd forgot it entirely in the convarsin' I had wid Miss Edwards thin."

"D'ye moind now, it's the devil's own news I has to tell ye, an' it's afther givin' ye the cowl chills it'll be doin'." Be the holy piper o' Killarney, I'm thinkin' ye won't belave it."

At these words of the Irishman, a look of horror overspread the face of Edna Edwards, and she became very pale, as she cried out:

"Oh, Lola! It is indeed terrible—even beyond belief. I strove hard to drive it from my mind, and with the help of Mickey, I succeeded; but now it rushes upon me with ten-fold horror. Tell her, Mickey; for I cannot!"

"For goodness' sake, what have you to tell me, that is so very dreadful? Nothing that concerns us, I hope?"

"Thunder an' turf! It's the most devilish thing ever was known in Texas, Miss Lola. Begorra, it's not fit for the likes o' ye to hear; but, I suppose I must be afther tellin' ye. That spawn o' the Avil One, King Kent, robbed and shot his own fa-ather, the owld captain, last night, at twelve be the watch!"

"Good Heavens!" burst from the lips of Lola, who became pale as death.

"But no—that can't be! Such a crime is beyond belief. You do not mean it, Mickey?"

"Thru it is, Miss Lola—as thru as the prayers o' the praste. Sure the devil will snake King Kint through the fires o' tormint foriver, for the doin's last night!"

"It's only too true, Lola," put in Edna. "There is a crowd of men at Knowles Ranch. The negroes are howling, and terribly frightened."

"They have found an iron box in a *motte* near the ranch, which had been blown open with powder, and is supposed to have contained a large sum of money. One of the negroes, it seems, saw and recognized Kent Knowles, as he fled from the scene of his horrible and unnatural crime."

"Captain Knowles was found dead—shot through the breast—in the cellar, with his night-dress on; and a hole fresh dug, showed where the robbers had dug up the chest of gold, which no one knew anything about, except the captain and his son Kent. Isn't it just too horrible?"

"The word does not describe it," said Lola, with a shudder. "Papa and Dick will be perfectly dumb with astonishment. It is awful."

"Upon me sowl, young ladies, I wouldn't go near the ranch afther dark, if ye war till give me Dublin Castle! Sure the ghost o' the owld captain 'll wandher about, ontill his devil of a son has been kilt entirely!"

"They will hang King Kent, without a trial, if they can catch him," asserted Edna.

By this time, the three had reached the veranda and Mickey quickly threw his right leg over his mule's head—he could place both feet on the ground while yet astride—and assisted Edna to alight.

The two girls entered the house, and the faithful Irishman attended to the horse and mule; muttering to himself the while such expressions as, "He's the devil's own spawn, bad 'cess to him! He'll burn in a hot corner, be gorra!" This last being given in a loud and indignant voice.

The colonel soon joined Mickey, who, in his own peculiar way, detailed the news, and reported in regard to the business upon which he had been sent down the Rio Brazos.

Colonel Landers was thunderstruck, and ordering his horse, sprung into the saddle, drove spurs, and galloped fast toward the Brazos, and Knowles Ranch.

Mickey made fast time to the culinary department, and surprised and gratified the old "Auntie" in charge by his voracious appetite. Then he stretched himself in the shade of the bottom-timber, for a prolonged *siesta*, it being long past the hour of noon when he awoke.

During this time, Lola and Edna had lunched, and gossiped freely; exchanging confidences, examining needle-work, at which the "Lily of Leon" was expert, and had then taken a ride on the prairie—they being unable to find Mickey, and being obliged to call one of the negroes to equip their horses.

Soon after their return, however, the Irishman made his appearance at the dwelling, with a huge chunk of corn-pone in one hand, and a rib of roast beef in the other; eating with keen relish, and wearing his plug hat more upon the back of his head than ever.

The young ladies caught a glimpse of him, from their window, and fairly screamed in merriment at the sight. When their mirth had subsided—the same not "setting back" Mickey in the least—Lola bade him prepare to accompany her and Edna down the Leon bottom-timber, for rifle practice.

Mickey actually danced with delight, at the prospect of fun with the "ger-ruls;" but he did not allow his joy to interfere with mastication.

Daring Dick had presented Lola with a superb little rifle, richly ornamented with inlaid silver filagree work; and she, to please the donor, had practiced until she had become quite expert in the use of the gun. Edna was equally as skillful, and she had left her rifle at Landers Ranch on the occasion of her last visit—the two practicing for hours at a time, when with each other.

Mickey McCafferty made fast time eating. He then bathed his face and hands, and got down his rifle—an old "Kentuck" that the colonel had long since thrown aside, and which, although Mickey frequently carried the same, no person had ever seen him fire. Indeed, he appeared to be afraid of a gun, notwithstanding his "military record."

Soon Edna and Lola appeared, in becoming costumes, their little rifles in hand; and they both looked enchantingly lovely, presenting a picture to chain the eye with admiration; the Irishman, in strong contrast to the maidens, marching ahead, with shouldered rifle, aping the airs of a borderman, peering around suspiciously at the thickets, and at times throwing his gun into the hollow of his left arm, with his thumb on the hammer; as if he expected cause for the immediate use of the rifle—as if deadly danger threatened the maidens whom he guarded and guided, his eyes staring wildly all the while.

All this was done so awkwardly, his walk and poise of form being so comical, that he kept Edna and Lola laughing almost continuously; and the awful crime of King Kent was, for the time being, banished from their minds.

As to the villain himself, it was reasonable to suppose that he had fled from Knowles Ranch, as fast as the fleetest horse could carry him; as he would know that the Vigilantes would hunt for him high and low, for a long distance, and at all points of the compass.

CHAPTER XIII.

CARRIED INTO CAPTIVITY.

HAD it not been for the continuous jabbering of Mickey, the horrible crime of King Kent would, doubtless, have been uppermost in the minds of Edna and Lola; and their spirits would not only have been at a low ebb, but they would have appeared and felt decidedly funeral-like.

The two maidens and their attendants passed down the Leon, where the ripple of the waters among the reeds and flags along the shore furnished soft and fitting music, in consonance with the scenes through which they passed; while, high on the tree-tops, softened by distance, and in harmony with the melody from the river, floated the song of many birds, and the hum of insects.

The Irishman was delighted at having charge of the "gerruls;" and, when not running his tongue like a Yankee shuttle, hummed the air of "Erin go Bragh."

About half a mile down the river they wandered, before Lola called a halt.

"Now, Mickey," said the young girl, "will

you please pin up this circular piece of paste-board on that tree yonder, and we will soon be ready?"

Both the maidens then proceeded to load their rifles, which they did in so dexterous and graceful a manner as to cause the Irishman, who had never before accompanied them to practice, to open his eyes in wonder and admiration.

"Be the prize-pig o' Donnybrook fair, but it's Mickey McCafferty 'll take oath he never saw a recruit of three months' standin' fade a gun-muzzle wid half the aise as yous gerruls! Sure, thin, I'd not be afeard till hould the targit in me fingers, afther obsarvin' the beautiful way yees has o' handlin' the shooters."

The light laugh of both young ladies followed the remarks of Mickey, as they adjusted caps on the nipples of their rifles.

"Stand aside more to the left, Mickey!" directed Lola; "it is my first shot, and I fear, the tip of your nose being sunburnt, and more prominent than the bull's-eye, it might get slightly damaged."

"Sure, an' I'd feel proud o' the ch'ice ye'd make betune them, Miss Lola. Fire away, thin! I'd not moind havin' a bit o' me nose tuck aff in a fri'ndly way; an' it would sarve as a reminbrance o' ye in the days that's comin', when I won't be luckin' at yer purty face any more."

The sharp report of Lola's rifle now broke on the air. The bullet struck the outside of the small piece of pasteboard some three inches from its center. Then Edna fired, striking the bull's-eye, fair and square, at thirty paces.

The next shot by Lola was planted also in the bull's-eye, and then a whispered consultation between the two maidens followed.

The Irishman was examining the target, and expatiating upon the skill of his fair friends, in muttered soliloquy.

"Now, Mickey," said Lola, with a merry twinkle in her eye; "here is a large leaf. You have been a soldier, and have nerve. Will you please just hold it in your hand, for me to shoot at?"

"W'u'dn't ye be afther shootin' a few more times first?" returned Mickey. "Begorra, yer first shot was three inches from the cinther; an' three inches on a man's hand is somethin' till be losin'. Besides, how kin I be afther knowin' if ye bees aimin' at the lafe, or at me hid? Bedad, I can't watch the shooter an' the lafe both!"

"Why do you wish to watch the leaf?" asked Edna, laughing.

"Till see if ye hit it, av coorse."

"You simpleton! Why, there will be a hole through it if we hit it—will there not?"

"Be the powers o' powther, ye bees right!" returned the Irishman, scratching his head; "an' through me hand, too, I'm thinkin'!"

"Here, hold the long stem of the leaf," directed Lola; "stand up, like a soldier. Eyes front! Steady!"

As the last words were spoken, Lola was returning to her position; but, observing that Edna was laughing immoderately, she turned about, and perceived that Mickey had lowered his hand, and that both arms were hanging by his side.

"What are you doing now? Did I not direct you to hold the leaf out?"

Thus asked Lola.

"Be the pipers o' Ballyhack! Ye tould me till stand like a sojer, an' it's that I am. A sojer w'u'd luck like a fool standin' wid one arrum out, houldin' a lafe. It's new tactics ye'd be afther t'achin' me."

"Mickey McCafferty, you are incorrigible!" exclaimed Lola, petulantly; "but we will now insure your safety. Stand behind that tree, and hold a leaf in each hand, just clear of the trunk, and both Edna and myself will shoot at the same time. You see, then, it will be impossible to hit you."

"Thin yees don't be afther thinkin' the bullet w'u'd go through the tree entoirely?"

"What an unreasonable being you are!" said Edna. "You ought to know that it is impossible. Lola, station him behind the tree. We are wasting time."

Not without some trouble and much laughter, did they succeed in placing the Irishman in position; he holding the leaves in trembling hands.

No sooner had Lola raised her rifle than, to the vexation of both the girls, the leaves disappeared.

"What are you about now?" demanded Lola. "Begorra, yees didn't hit aither o' thim!" yelled McCafferty.

"Why, we haven't fired at all yet, you goose!" cried out Edna, impatiently. "Mickey, hold up those leaves! You know very well we haven't fired. You haven't heard any report."

"Have I got till be afther stayin' here all day?" he inquired. "Sure, I darsn't come out from this, at all, at all!"

"Hold up those leaves! I insist upon it, for the last time!"

And both the maidens elevated their rifles. But, as they saw no sign of their orders being obeyed, they both fired, with but a slight interval between the shots.

Mickey, knowing now that their rifles were empty, danced around the tree, shouting:

"Splindid shots, both o' thim, gerruls! Right through the cinther o' aich lafe. Be the powers! I c'u'dn't ha' done betther meself."

"What is that you say?" demanded Lola.

"I was afther sayin' yees both hit the l'aves," returned Mickey, holding them up, and exhibiting a large hole in each.

"This is the first time I ever knew, or heard, of a rifle shooting around a curve," said Edna, as she took the leaves from the Irishman's hand, "and, besides, I never knew a bullet to expand to such an extent. These rifles are both small bores, and those holes indicate a ball of about two ounces in weight."

"Yes, they are just about the size of your finger. Mickey, you are very cute, but you are a poor hand to hold a target. Were you afraid of a gun when you were in the army?"

"Divil a bit am I afeard of a gun," said the shame-faced ex-military man—"if I'm on the right side o' that same."

"Do you see that squirrel, Lola?" asked Edna, as she pointed up at the branches of the tree, the trunk of which they had been shooting at.

All directed their gaze at the point indicated.

At that instant a crashing blow sounded in the ears of the maidens, who, turning quickly, saw poor McCafferty felled to the earth, and themselves confronted by four fierce and ruffianly looking men.

At a glance they felt positive that these belonged to the outlaw band whose depredations had created great excitement for some weeks past, among the rancheeros of the Leon and Brazos.

Their cries of alarm were stifled by rough palms, and they were hastily gathered in the arms of two of the cowardly intruders, and hurried through the bottom-timber, the others following behind, armed to the teeth, and ready to deal death to any who might pursue them.

But the maidens knew there was no one to help them in this dire extremity—no one to rescue them from the dastards who were bearing them they knew not where, and to a fate they dare not think of.

Hurriedly did the rude outlaws hasten some five hundred yards down the Leon, when they reached their horses. Here they mounted, taking the terrified young girls up before them, and sped, as fast as the nature of the ground would permit, down the Leon, in cover of the timber.

How long or how far they traveled, Edna and Lola could not form an opinion; but they knew that they had been carried many miles from Landers Ranch, and judged that they must be near the Brazos, or the confluence of the rivers.

Both shuddered, as the horses slackened pace, and a yell of triumph pierced their ears.

The next moment they found themselves within a dark, tree-crowned basin, with high, clay sides.

A fire was blazing in the middle. Horse and camp equipage, as well as arms, were scattered around.

Brutal, long-haired, low-browed, scowling men stood here and there, or were seated upon saddles, smoking.

All this the maidens saw at a glance.

Then words came to their ears, in a voice that seemed to both to have a familiar ring:

"Welcome, young ladies, to the retreat of the Basin Bandits! King Kent is proud and happy to entertain you!"

The poor girls turned, and looked at the speaker.

King Kent, with wild and bloodshot eyes glaring gloatingly and exultantly, stood before them!

Both the maidens shrieked aloud in horror.

They knew they were in the power of the miscreant, the merciless murderer, Kent Knowles, the parricide!

CHAPTER XIV.

CAPTURED BY COMANCHES.

DARING DICK and Turtle, the Tonkaway, did not waste time seeking the stampede in the vicinity of Landers Ranch but galloped up the Rio Leon, for many miles; striking the broad trail, which led, in an almost straight course, parallel with the Leon.

It was noon before they reached the point where the herd had been headed off by Antonio, and forced to cross the river. Here, the chief alighted, and passed the jaw-straps of his black steed to Dick, saying:

"Let my white brother stay on horse. Turtle want look at trail in mud of river."

"All right, pard—proceed! I don't like the look of things. The horses would have kept right on, up-stream, unless headed off. It looks bad."

The chief did not wait to hear this; but, with long strides, disappeared in the timber.

After being gone some fifteen minutes, he returned, and sprung upon his horse before saying a word. Then he gazed into the face of Dick, who returned it, inquiringly.

"Horses no stampede, no scare," he asserted, decidedly. "Antonio he bad, all bad. Turtle know bad when look in eye. Antonio drive

horses up Leon. Go to Colorado, mebbe so Rio Grande. Sell horses. Get heap silver. Bad white men on Brazos. Mebbe so come go with Antonio.

"So many,"—holding up three fingers—"heap 'fraid cross Comanche trails. Lose horses. Lose scalp. Turtle talk straight. What my white brother do? Waugh! Comanche war-trail open."

"What will I do? Why, I shall follow the trail, if it leads me over the Colorado. I'll have those horses, if I have to shoot every Greaser from his saddle!"

"Good! Dick talk heap good. War-path open. Turtle heap glad. Come. Broad trail. Waugh!"

And, circling his scalping-knife over his eagle-plumes, Turtle shot out the war-cry of his tribe.

As for Daring Dick, he plunged into a deep study.

He realized that it would be a long chase—that at the least, more than a week must elapse before he could return to Landers Ranch with the horses.

His prolonged absence would cause Lola and the colonel much apprehension and anxiety.

Yet, there was no help for this.

He must recover the herd of horses.

Colonel Landers would know, by the following day, that they were gone.

Strange to say, Dick gave not a thought to King Kent, not connecting him with the driving away of the horses; although, if he had pondered upon the past, he would have recalled the fact that Antonio and King Kent had often been seen in company, on the prairies, and on the Rio Brazos.

Soon the two pards had passed through the river-bottom, forded the stream, and then, removing the equipments from their animals, and rubbing them down, staked them among the mesquite grass, and proceeded to cook their simple prairie dinner. After resting sufficiently long to allow their horses to feed, they continued on the trail.

They followed this, without pressing their horses to such an extent as to fatigue the animals; for this would have been very imprudent, as they were, at any time, liable to be discovered, by roving war-parties of Comanches.

Indeed, both Turtle and Dick, thought it very strange that the Mexicans, being but three in number, had dared advance into so dangerous a section of country. They had expected and hoped, with good grounds, that they would overtake the Greasers before reaching the Colorado, and their disappointment was great. However, they thought it very improbable that the thieves would proceed up the San Saba any great distance.

The trail was fresh, and they expected to run their game to earth before sunset, or else discover the camp during the coming night, when there would be a bright full moon.

This fact in itself was not favorable for any small party of men; as, when the moon was at full, the Comanches chose that time to go on the war-path. They knew that they were now in the vicinity of the course followed by war-parties when passing either down toward the border settlements, or returning to their villages.

This, however, gave them no apprehension.

The Tonkaway was eager and anxious to add scalps to his belt, and avenge the terrible death of his squaw and pappoose—this being now the principal object of his life.

Along the border of the San Saba timber, they proceeded, the trail being plain; but after continuing a few miles, they discovered that the herd had been divided—nearly half of them having been driven over the river, and the remainder along the border of the timber on the east side of the stream. Turtle decided to cross the San Saba, following one party, and Daring Dick the other; keeping on toward the big bend—a point where both of our friends had on previous occasions hunted black bears together.

The two men now separated, believing that the trails would reunite at or beyond the bend; and they agreed upon signals by which they should be able to rejoin each other the coming night.

Some eight miles from the Colorado, Dick found that the trail led away from the San Saba and out upon the open plain; but he followed it on, soon finding that the horses had been driven in a half-circle, sweeping away toward the river—this curving trail being miles in extent.

The young man was pleased when he again found himself approaching the shades of the San Saba, for the sun had set, and he was weary and hungry.

Fully believing that the camp of the thieves was within a mile or two of the outer swell of the bend, that the herd had been reunited, and that Turtle was ahead in the timber, having discovered the camp—fully confident of this, Daring Dick continued on toward the dark shades.

As he drew near he halted and listened intently, for he thought it probable that Antonio and his comrade thieves might have seen him on the prairie, and would ambush him. Not a thought of danger from any other source entered his mind.

Had he possessed the power to pierce through the foliage in front of him, Dick would have turned his horse and fled precipitately from the spot.

Half an hour previous, a dozen fierce Comanches, in all their hideous war-paint, had urged their horses through the timber, after fording the river. They were the advance of a war-party which was on the west side of the stream.

So eager were these savage scouts to inspect the plain to the eastward that their half-wild mustangs sprung, at hiss of quirt, free from the timber; but their red riders forced them back to cover when they perceived the white horse-man on the plain.

Daring Dick was intent on the trail, it being moonlight, and did not observe the Indians.

Yet, for all that, he was suspicious in connection with the Mexicans.

All was silent—silent as death, in his front; and death, in a terrible form, lurked, awaiting him.

Daring Dick spurred forward.

Suddenly his steed halted, with a wild snort, pricked ears, and whirled around; but, at that instant, a half-dozen warriors sprung from the branches overhead, directly upon, and beside the horse.

Dick was at once clutched, and dragged from his saddle.

Then followed a fierce struggle for life.

There was no chance to use revolvers but our hero jerked his bowie, on the instant.

Hurling the Comanches from him, he stood, for a moment, free. But it was only for a moment.

They rushed madly upon him, not a sound escaping their lips.

Lightning-like, the terrible bowie of Daring Dick circled through the air, and red braves fell before the glittering steel, cloven from breast to thigh. Thus it was for a few moments. Then, a burly brave sprung forward, over his dead and dying comrades, and drove his scalping-knife into Dick's shoulder; but the blade was prevented from entering deep, or being drawn downward to a murderous extent, by two terrific slashes up and down, by the young Texan; the warrior's arm being laid bare to the bone on both sides, forcing him, as the muscles were severed, to relinquish his clutch. Then, the bowie of Daring Dick was buried, to the buck-horn, in the paint-daubed breast!

It was a grand scene, to witness that one brave white man, battling for life with a dozen fierce Comanches, who made war their trade. Dick fought with the strength of ten, and the desperation born of despair; for, well he knew, he could not escape death.

A prayer for Lola was on his lips, as he jerked his bowie from the breast of his last victim; and, at that very instant, an arrow whizzed through the air, striking his head, and plowing up his scalp!

Then Daring Dick fell, and lay, without sense or motion, beside the gory and knife-gashed braves, some of whom were chanting their death-songs, in low, monotonous, guttural tones.

Soon the young man was bound, hand and foot.

One of the braves hastened to the river, crossed, and in a rapid run, hurried to meet the main war-party, and report the capture and the casualties to his chief.

Ere long Dick recovered his senses, to find that he was bound fast, a captive to a merciless savage foe!

An hour afterward, he was dragged along, toward the edge of the high cliffs of the Rio San Saba.

His hat was gone, his shirt was torn from his back, and the blood flowed from his wounded head and shoulders.

"He is a great brave. Let him die a warrior's death. The bees will sting him, but he will laugh until the Great Spirit comes for him."

"He is a warrior. Let him die a warrior's death."

Thus spoke Rolling Thunder, the war-chief of the Comanches, as the messenger reported; and the runner had hastened to return, when Daring Dick was lowered down the side of the cliff as has been detailed in our opening chapter—his red captors witnessing the first agony caused by being thus suspended, they yelling, in mockery, derision, and exultation.

Then the war-party vanished, leaving their victim suspended over the cliff; there to be stung to death, at sunrise, when the bees should buzz out from the caverns close behind him.

"Father in Heaven, have mercy! My cross is greater than I can bear!"

No wonder this prayer left the lips of Daring Dick, so earnestly. No more fervent supplication was ever offered.

There the red fiends left him, to die an awful death—a lingering death of excruciating agony!

CHAPTER XV.

THE BANDITS' CHANGE OF BASE.

THE piercing cries of Lola Landers and Edna Edwards had no effect upon the outlaws, who made no movement to bind or gag them, this proving to the terrified maidens, that they were

far from any ranch, or the possibility of being heard.

Big Bill jerked his sombrero from his head, rubbed his brow, and strode to one side, clutching a canteen of whisky, and gluing the nozzle to his lips, taking a long and deep draught.

They had had a terrible time with King Kent the previous night.

Like a madman, he had galloped to, and over the Brazos ford, and on down the river, toward the basin; and he would, probably, in his conscience-tortured state, have guided his horse through the undergrowth, and over the bank as on a previous occasion, had not his wild outcries been heard, and some one of his followers rushed up the trail, and clutched the bridle of his horse.

They had borne him into one of the cave-like excavations in the wall of the basin, and plied him with liquor, until he became stupid, and fell into a deep sleep.

When Big Bill and Crooked Carl arrived with the gold, and revealed the fact that King Kent had shot his own father, the bandits were not only horrified by the deed, but greatly concerned as to their safety; knowing well that the country would be scoured, far and wide, by the Vigilantes, and their retreat, without doubt discovered. All knew that an immediate departure from the vicinity of the Brazos and San Saba was a necessity.

Their lives depended upon this; for a large force of rancheroes would turn out after such a fearful crime had been committed.

Even the unreasonable quantity of liquor that King Kent had drank did not stupefy his tortured brain for any length of time. He distributed the gold with lavish hand, and called upon all, every few minutes, to drink with him.

He had been, by the night's hellish work, transformed into a very demon. His appearance was truly horrible.

His black and serpent-like eyes were blood-shot, his swarthy face contorted, and he grated his teeth almost continuously.

He had at once decided to abduct Lola Landers, and hasten, the following night, toward the Colorado.

A spy, on the following morning, brought the news to the basin, that the herd of horses had been driven at speed up the Leon the previous night, and that Daring Dick and Turtle had followed.

This left a safe opening to carry off Lola; and, as the Mexican reported having seen Edna Edwards, riding toward Landers Ranch, King Kent, who had a great enmity toward Edna's father, resolved to have his revenge on him at the same time. He knew that he could get a large sum of money for her, from any of the wealthy Castilians beyond the Rio Grande.

We now view the dastardly parricide, standing within six feet of the trembling maidens, viewing them in silence. At length he spoke—his voice, unnatural and low, and reminding one of the hiss of a serpent—he thrusting a stick in his mouth, upon which he ground his teeth viciously, betraying his nervousness.

"You know me, Lola Landers," he said, "and you remember my oath in the bottom-timber, when you rejected my love! You scorned my suit. You hated and despised me, and for what?"

"Because I was wild and reckless. Because I was not a milksop and fawning sycophant."

"I swore you should marry no other man while I lived, but you fell in love with Dick Robinson. I know of your every movement since you rejected me. I have had trusty spies at Landers Ranch all the time. You now know what you did when you scorned me. Henceforth, I live only for revenge and money!"

"Do you hear me, Lola Landers? I am a parricide—a demon! I am a curse to myself, and to all others. The only pleasure open to me in this world, is that I might clasp you in my arms, and press burning kisses upon your lips."

The poor girl, sick and faint, sunk upon the bosom of Edna Edwards, who seemed suddenly to banish her fear; her daring nature asserting itself, at the outrageous language used by King Kent.

The villain continued:

"I swore you should be mine, Lola Landers, and I have kept my oath; for you are mine, body and soul! I swore to have revenge upon your father, for language used by him, among the rancheroes, against my character. I swore to have revenge upon—ay, to have the blood of—Daring Dick, for winning your love; and he shall die by my hand! Already he is in my net—he and his red pard. Antonio and his *raqueiros* are in my pay. The stampede was a plot of mine, to draw Dick away from Landers Ranch."

"He is now far away, toward the Colorado, on the trail of the stampede, which he will not overtake, until beyond the big bend of the San Saba, when the Greasers will capture him, by strategy, and bind him hand and foot, until my coming."

"I promise you that you shall look into his face again. I will give you an interview, for the sight will add to my revenge. He shall behold you in my loving embrace."

"Your father will follow my trail, and old man Edwards also. They will fall into my

power. I tell you we'll have a merry picnic, my beauties, on the Rio San Saba. Do you hear me?

"Do you begin to realize who and what I am? I am King Kent, the Captain of the Basin Bandits, the assassin, the parricide!"

The concluding words were fairly shrieked, and the livid face of King Kent twitched, and his limbs as well, as though he was about to have a fit.

Lola Landers fainted dead away, her senses leaving her in a piercing shriek; but Edna supported her, while Big Bill sprang forward, with a canteen of whisky and one of water, which he proffered to the black-eyed beauty.

"Thanks," said Edna, as she poured some of the water upon the head of her friend; "any act of kindness is appreciated in this horde of demons. Is there the least spark of manhood, remaining in your depraved breasts? Has not one of you a sister, or a mother; that you thus stand like cowards, and listen to the words of that fiend in human shape, who acknowledges himself the murderer of his own father?"

"Can you stand thus, and see two helpless maidens insulted, their feelings outraged, by such a monster? King Kent"—turning with flashing eyes, and gazing into the face of the bandit chief—"you are a fiend, a merciless, heartless fiend! You are more cruel and degraded than the most bloodthirsty Apache on the Rio Pecos!"

"I scorn you! I defy you! This poor lily has wilted before your scorching words, but I shall bear up, and keep my courage for her sake. You shall not harm a hair of her head while I live."

"Ha! ha! Good! Remarkably fine, Miss Edwards!" sneered King Kent. "You should have gone on the stage. Then you would not have been in the awkward fix you now find yourself in, and might have made your mark in the world."

"But you have lost your opportunity. I admire your 'sand'—upon my soul, I do! You're a brick, Edna; and I'm not sure you would not suit King Kent, as a bride, better than this baby friend of yours. I'll wed you both, I reckon, for I'm more of a Mormon than anything else."

"Ha! ha! to be sure. I'm a destroying angel, or a destroyer of angels, whichever you choose. But, enough of this sentimentality."

"Stir around, boys, and pack up! We must start at dusk, and keep on the east side of the Leon timber for security. Crooked Carl, show these young ladies their apartment, and guard the entrance until we start."

"Big Bill, get two horses ready for their accommodation on the trail. Hustle 'round lively, boys, for it's near sunset!"

Immediately all was bustle.

Edna and Lola, the latter having recovered, were conducted into one of the cave-like excavations, where they threw themselves upon a pile of blankets, and sobbed in each other's arms.

Crooked Carl stood on guard, as directed.

Pack-mules were led into the basin, and loaded with provisions, cooking utensils, and the necessities.

Whisky was swallowed freely by all.

The horses were equipped, arms examined, and ammunition looked to. Then, as the sun disappeared, the Basin Bandits left their secluded retreat forever; fording the Leon, and passing up the same, along the border of the bottom-timber.

Lola Sanders and Edna Edwards, secured to saddles, rode in their midst; both the unhappy girls dazed with the most dread forebodings, terror, and almost hopeless despair; although they could not bring themselves to believe that their all-merciful Father would suffer King Kent to fulfill his terrible oath of vengeance, to any further extent than a brief captivity to themselves.

Thus muttering prayers, and hoping even against hope, they were borne along; every step of their horses shooting a pain through their hearts—they, as the line of ranches was at length passed, and they had pondered more deeply upon the words of their cowardly captor, losing all hope.

They truly believed, as the darkness fell around them, that they were doomed—doomed, without any hope of rescue, to a terrible fate, compared with which death would be a mercy.

CHAPTER XVI.

TWO TO THE MANNER BORN.

JUST as the sun was sinking below the horizon, casting its red glow aslant over the plains of San Saba, had one been in a balloon high up over the big bend he would have decided that the ground below him was destined to be the theater of most tragic and bloody scenes during the coming night.

A close scrutiny of the surrounding country would have revealed the fact that the big bend was the objective point for more than one party of human beings, among whom were white, yellow and red men.

Just at this time, a large herd of horses arrived in the near vicinity of this bend. The herd was here divided; one-half of the animals,

in charge of one Mexican, being driven into the timber and across the San Saba, at the north side of the bend, and hurried west under cover of the woods—the other portion, with two Mexicans in charge, making a wide, sweeping curve over the east prairie and entering the timber to the south of the swell, proceeding also under cover of the woods up the south side; both herds aiming for the entrance to or neck of the bend, but on different sides.

By one portion of this herd being driven across the neck of the bend, the herd would be reunited.

Then some distance north toward the Colorado, following the border of the timber up the San Saba toward the bend, could be seen two horsemen—one red, the other white—Turtle, the Tonkaway, and Daring Dick; while far to the westward, also speeding in the direction of the bend, feathers and scalps flaunting and flying in the wind of their speed, lance-points glittering in the red rays of the setting sun, and quirts circling about their heads to curl with vicious whacks about the hams of their mustangs—thus on, like dry leaves before a "norther," flew over the prairie a horde of war-painted Comanches, some three-score in number.

And to the south, just entering the border of the timber, a quarter of a mile from the swell of the bend, were two other horsemen.

Both the latter were white.

Neither one of these parties suspected the presence of other human beings than themselves within a day's ride, at least, all being hidden from the view of each other by the towering timber, as described.

Could one have gazed far beyond the Rio Colorado, nearly a score of villainous-looking riders might have been observed, with two beautiful maidens secured to their saddles in the midst of the ruffianly band. These were the Basin Bandits, under King Kent, with their captives, Lola and Edna.

The outlaws were pointed direct for the confluence of the San Saba with the Colorado, and of course intended crossing and following up the former stream, which would bring them also to the big bend.

Thus were the fates leading many who held deadly enmity toward each other to the same point.

We have already recorded, in our story, something in connection with all of these parties except one. This was the two white riders from the south plain, who entered the border of the nearest point of timber and encamped. Had they kept on to the river-bank they would have discovered that portion of the herd of horses that had been driven in a wide curve over the prairie eastward, then into the timber on the south side of the bend, and up the river toward the neck; but they did not, nor were they discovered by Antonio and his party.

These two men, one would know at a glance, were old scouts of the border.

Both were roughly clad in rent and greasy buckskin breeches thrust into boot-tops, black sombreros much the worse for wear, and gray woolen shirts.

They were armed with rifles, revolvers and bowie-knives.

Their saddles were "Texas-trees," which showed much service; and all the "tricks" and "traps" necessary to a prairie-roamer on long scouts were attached by buckskin strings to the cantles of their saddles, including a roll of blankets.

Both these men were small in stature, spare in flesh, and their hair long and sprinkled with gray.

They were, in fact, thin and bony, their features sharp, but agile and sinewy, and evidently of great strength, when their slim build was taken into consideration.

Neither of them was under fifty years of age.

Their hair was unkempt and matted, and each had a thin beard; yet there was no other resemblance between them, and to look into their faces, they were almost opposite in appearance.

One was "Old Rocky," whose real name—known to but few—was William Young.

Old Rocky was one of the most celebrated scouts of the great Southwest, being dubbed as recorded from the fact that he had been for a long time in the Rocky Mountains, previous to his coming to Texas, and was in the habit of mentioning some circumstance or adventure, quite frequently, which had come under his observation in the Great Divide.

Old Rocky, aside from the description already given, was naturally of a florid complexion, his cheeks being quite red at the time of which we write; but it was sunburnt, as was his entire face, his brows were beetling, and his sharp eyes seemed to be dark blue, but when he became excited appeared black. His teeth were large and prominent, his lips being continually apart, and he chewing tobacco, as if by contract.

Old Rocky was panther-like in motion, keen-eyed, a most skillful scout and trailer, and a crack shot with either rifle or revolver.

He rode a raw-boned dark bay horse, of great endurance, and fleet of foot; although one would not thus judge, to look at the animal,

which was the very personation of listlessness and laziness, when lariatied out to grass, or even when on the trail, except when rendered alert and ready for business by some signal of its master.

The eyes of the horse were large and intelligent; in fact, the owner often asserted that his "critter knowed more'n half the humans on this hyer big ball o' dirt."

His companion, so like in build, and of the same age, was equally as celebrated as a scout, ranger, trailer, guide, and skillful shooter.

His sobriquet was Single Eye.

No one knew his right name.

The appellation he bore was very appropriate, as he had lost his left eye, the cavity being deeply shrunken; but his remaining optic was sharp, keen, piercing, and gray in color.

His face was somewhat wrinkled, more so a great deal than Old Rocky's, and was utterly devoid of color, except a deep tan.

Had he lived an indoor life, he would have been quite pale—perhaps have seemed almost bloodless. Although so far advanced in years, he was like lightning when aroused; and his sinews were like steel. Indeed both men were perfect terrors, when fighting Indians or Mexicans.

Single Eye, strange to say, rode a horse which had but one optic; the legs of the animal being long, and the beast generally ungainly. Yet it was called by its master, "Skip-Lively;" and the name was most appropriate, as it could run like a deer.

Skip-Lively hated Indians as much as did its master, and could smell the red-men; being, therefore, a good guard at night, snorting when it caught the scent of savages.

Many had Skip-Lively killed, for in a fight the horse became furious; clutching an Indian, on several occasions, by the shoulder, between his huge jaws, and shaking the savage as a terrier would a rat. Then it would hurl its victim to the earth, and stamp the brave to a jelly beneath his hoofs.

Thus we introduce two of the most noted borderers, who arrived, as we have seen, opportunely at a point where their services would be needed, in the cause of justice, mercy, and humanity.

They passed but a short distance into the timber, and encamped near a small spring, removing the equipments from their horses, and allowing the animals free range, dragging the neck-ropes.

After filling coffee-pot and canteens, the horses were permitted to drink at the spring.

Then a small fire was kindled, of selected wood that would cause but little smoke; coffee was placed upon it to steep, and corn-pone with half-cooked venison was taken from their saddle-bags, and upon sharp sticks placed before the fire, to finish cooking.

This was all done in silence; both, at times, sweeping the surrounding shades with their gaze.

When all was under way for a meal, Old Rocky stole from the camp, and made a wide circle around the same, examining the ground; but he soon returned, breaking the impressive silence as he re-entered the camp.

"Reckon, pard Single Eye, we-uns kin chaw grub hyeraways, without ther puserlanimous red hellyuns yowlin' inter our years, an' shoot-in' thar pesky p'inted sticks inter our 'natermy. Everythin' 'pears calm, an' chuck-full o' peace an' quiet."

"Thet don't count fer nothin', Ole Rock," asserted his pard, ejecting a squirt of tobacco-juice far into the thicket. "I allers air b'ilin' over wi' suspish when hit's too still ter breathe hard. Howsomever, I don't reckon thar's ary a red crawlin' 'roun' this hyer bottom, er Skip 'u'd smell ther condemned cuss, an' gi'n we-uns fa'r warnin'."

"Ther ha'r-t'arin' Curmanches giner'ly jumps critters, an' skutes arter a pilgrim, an' don't crawl 'roun' in ther bush, which mought muss thar feathers, an' git thar long ha'r tangled in ther thorns. They doesn't often sling thar-selves 'roun' permisc'us-like, an' a three-legged mule c'u'd easy gi'n 'em a hefty race when they're a foot-back."

"I ain't slingin' informashe at yer, Ole Rock. 'Cos why, yer knows hit all; but I must git off gab 'bout somethin', er I'll forgit how ter wag tongue. Thar ain't been a word spoke atween we-uns since noon. Hev yer gut ther solemcholies, er cain't yer spar' time from chawin' terbac'? I've chawed, an' chawed myself, ontill I'm sick enough ter puke up my kneepans. Some days I chaws 'nough ter weaken ther narves of a griz' b'ar. Thet's when I'm on a trail, an' can't stop fer grub."

"Thet's 'bout ther size o' hit wi' me, pard. Sometimes I chaws, an' chaws, without nothin' in my stum-jack, ontill I gits mad es a bob-tailed hornet, feels uglier than a horned toad, an' c'u'd yell loud 'nough, an' bilious 'nough ter skeer a blind mule inter a cyclone stompeda, without half tryin'."

"I feels jist nasty now, hyderphobic, an' c'u'd shoot out ole he yells, I tell yer, on 'count o' not chawin' nothin' 'ceptin' terbac', since sun-up."

"Thet's me, clean through, Ole Rock; an' yer

doesn't catch me out onter ther perrarer ag'in, ontil I sorter braces up wi' bottom feed. I wants some fish an' turtle; an' perforate my palperator, ef I doesn't hev sum!"

"Reckon my systermatics won't go back on br'iled catfish much, pard; an' I'm inclernated ter 'gree wi' yer 'bout takin' a ginerall lay-off, hyeraways. Hit smells fresh, river-way, an' we'll skute down through ther timber et sun-up, er I'm a four-barreled fool!"

"I'm sorter broke up myself, an' I c'u'dn't soar more'n a bob-tailed buzzard. Thunder an' blazes! but that coffee does smell like a norther from Araby, I'm blest, as Joe Booth used ter spit out.

"Wonder ef Joe's in San Antone. I'd twitter ter hear him spout his Spokeshake, as he giner'ly does 'roun' camp. He's a lightnin'-bug, an' his wings air on the flush day an' night."

But Old Rocky seemed suddenly to have discovered that he was getting "left," for he sprung to the fire, Single Eye being already seated on a log, with a tin-cup full of coffee beside him, and he with his mouth crammed with venison and corn-pone.

"Dang my 'Merican heart! Ef yer ain't gittin' ornighly hoggish, Single Eye!" growled Old Rocky. "Why didn't yer ring ther bell, like they does at ther Menger House in San Antone when ther hash is ready? Reckon I kin chamber some o' thet grub myself."

So saying, and flinging his "old soldier" into the bushes, Old Rocky poured out his coffee, and catching up a stick of meat and a chunk of corn-pone, proceeded to break his long fast with a gusto and appetite never known in the "States."

"Eat away, an' stop waggin' yer tongue, will yer? Ye'r es bad es Joe Booth, I swar; though he would gi'n hisself a show ter eat when he hed a chance—yer kin bet yer last bullet on thet!"

CHAPTER XVII.

SAVED FROM THE TORTURE.

OLD ROCKY and Single Eye finished their meal in silence, stowing away enough to have satisfied a half-dozen men not favored with appetites born of continuous breathing the free prairie air and sleeping upon mother earth.

Then each produced a corn-cob pipe, and with satisfaction and comfort stamped upon their honest faces, began to clip off small portions of "nigger-head" tobacco, from plugs which they took from their bullet-pouches. This they rubbed vigorously in their palms, then filled their pipes with the same, ignited the tobacco with fire-brands, and then spread their blankets in an adjacent thicket; placing their saddles for pillows, and laying their rifles beneath the blankets, to prevent them from getting dampened by the dew.

All their effects were placed within the thicket in such a manner that they could clutch any one in the darkness. Then the horses were led from the plains to a favorable place in which to graze on bottom-grass, and near to the thicket, where they were staked for the night. This was accomplished in a very short space of time. Then the fire was kicked and stamped out, and both men, without a word, went through with this task as if they had done the same upon many an occasion, as indeed they had.

Both then entered the thicket, and seating themselves side by side, smoked for some time in perfect silence.

The bark of coyotes, the occasional yelp of a prairie loafer, or black wolf, and the shriek of a panther were the more noticeable sounds of the night with, now and then, the hoot of an owl.

The continuous hum of insects, and the soft cool air of the bottom-timber, tended to induce somnolence; and, doubtless, both of the scouts were sleepy, as well as wearied in body. Yet, they seemed in no haste to lie down to pleasant dreams.

At length the voice of Old Rocky broke the silence.

"'Bout what locate hed we-uns better perceed, arter layin' off a bit, hyeraways, pard?"

"Dog-gone my perrarer perergrinatin' picture ef I hes any idee whar we'd orter pint! No use avortin' an' meanderin' 'roun', permisc'us-like, es I knows on. We've gut ter flit furdur ter ther east'ard, I reckon, or lose our cabase thatch, an' git scarified by ther red scum."

"Ther Curmanches 'u'd jist snicker ter git a show ter snatch we-uns bald-headed; but I'm a son of a gun if they hain't gut ter creep from under blankets 'arly in ther mornin', ter scoop us in."

"I'm reckonin' ther smoky sons o' Satan 'u'd hev a nasty time corralin' we-uns. They foun' thet out long ago. They don't dissect my in-ards ontil a hefty sprinklin' on 'em hev skuted, et stompede speed, ter ther Injun purgatory."

"Thar hes ter be a hefty batch on 'em ter git up 'sand' ter run in on us brash. Giner'ly they're 'fear'd ter tackle us. 'Fear'd's no name—skort!"

"I feels jist like sockin' hit ter a few o' ther scarifiers, Ole Rock; an' we're right on ther proper locate ter git a show. Ef we does, I

won't ax them ter 'scuse me, but lunge right in, an' reap a crap o' ha'r. Ef I doesn't, durn my skin! I wouldn't mind bein' pursued by a big war-party, fer, Skip kin pick up his hindlers, while I pick 'em off'n thar critters."

"Ye're mighty right, pard. We-uns air in a hunky locate fer ha'r; an' I doesn't opine thet our time's come jist yit, ter hev our bleed-mer-sheens hashed, or git shot chuck full o' arrers."

"Sculp me, but ther varmint's were plenty on ther San Saba, two moons ago; an' a pilgrim hed ter be es peart, an' dodge es speedy es a dipper-duck takes ter water, ter skin through this locate with a hull hide! Thet's sart'in sure."

"We-uns hev hed ther durn'dest owdacious luck of late. Hain't hearn a red skunk squeal, fer half a moon."

"Hit's scanderlous, Ole Rock—scanderlous ter think o' hit. I'm gittin' rusty, es well es my shooters. I'd like ter lunge right inter a Injun lay-out, helter-skelter, on ther splurge; gallop Skip full chisel, 'mong 'bout a hundred ov 'em! I don't reckon I'd make a fizzle o' ther biz, er git cotched fer ther tortur'."

"I kinder opine, pard, we-uns 'll strike 'sign' ter-morrer. Le's roll up now, an' sorter siester a leetle, es ther Greasers say. Ef thar's anythin' 'specious 'roun', ther nags 'll sashay an' snort, an' I'll sleep with one eye open. Thet's more'n yeou kin do, pard, without layin' plum awake."

"Mighty right yer air, Ole Rock; but one peeper air a hefty sight better'n none et all. Howsomever, I reckon I kin see 'bout es much when I puts my one on biz, es ary galoot in Texas. Ef I can't, Skip an' me tergether kin. Now I'm in fer a double-barrel ole he snooze."

With these words, the old prairie roamers laid back their heads upon their saddles, and were at once asleep.

All was soon still around them.

For fully an hour and a half, the two scouts slept, never moving a hair, and their breathing hardly perceptible; when the first wild yell of exultation from the Comanche warriors, who strode along the west bank of the San Saba, on the opposite side from the cliff in eager expectation of beholding the captive, Daring Dick, dragged to the verge of the same, and lowered, to be stung to death by the bees—this wild yell, long, loud, and piercing, sounded through the night air.

The horses of the two scouts jerked their heads upward from the sward, with snorts of alarm—the grass still hanging from their jaws, and their ears pricked forward toward the river, from whence the yells sounded.

The instant the sound broke on the air, Old Rocky and Single Eye sprung to their feet—the former crying out, in a surprised voice:

"By ther holy horn-spoon! Cuss my cats, ef thet warn't Injun music!"

"Dang my dogs, ef yer ain't kerrect, Ole Rock! Jark ther critters inter ther bush, an' le's skute towards ther drink. Thar's fun ahead, er I'm a bob-tailed mule!"

"Ther condemned red scarifiers air on ther San Saba, b'ilin' over with an appetite fer bleed an' ha'r; an' ef they hain't kerral'd a white pilgrim, I'll chaw bugs an' snakes fer grub, ther next six moons! I knows, by thar yelps."

"Hus-sh, pard! Don't be rambunctious, jist simmer down, an' we'll snake hit through ther bush lively. Better not take our long shooters—they'll be in ther way—an' I reckon, our sixes an' slashers 'll be enough fer us, in this hyer little rifle o' hellishness."

"Skoot air ther word, pard! Le's keep cluss tergether. Thar's hell afoot, er I'm a Piute!"

Hastily the horses were led into the thicket, and secured; then both the scouts stole noiselessly through the deep shades, toward the swell of the big bend.

No one within twenty feet would have heard their movements, notwithstanding they were passing through thick undergrowth, and moving rapidly. They appeared to be able to see in the darkness, or to follow the paths made by wild beasts, as though by instinct; and the frequent yells, of which they understood the meaning, caused them to increase their speed—no word passing between them.

They knew from the first sounds that the Indians were at the swell of the bend; and not this, but that the savages had captured some unfortunate white man, and were about to torture their captive.

From the first the old scouts had determined to effect a rescue, was such a thing possible, even were they forced to risk their own lives. And it would not be the first time, by many, that they had done this. In a little time they reached the bank of the river, but some slight distance from the cliff.

There they parted the bushes and beheld our hero, the red braves having just lowered him, as has been described. The latter then ran along the cliff, north, to a point where they could cross the stream and join the main war-party.

The whole Indian force, except those who were guarding the mustangs, were in plain view of the scouts.

It is needless to say that Old Rocky and Single Eye were furious.

They knew that the captive must be suffering great torture of mind and body.

They also knew the object of the merciless red-men in thus hanging him over the cliff.

They knew that the cliff was literally alive with wild bees, and that a horrible death awaited the poor man in the morning.

At first they believed the Indians were encamped near at hand, and that they intended to remain and witness the terrible death of their captive.

The yells of the savages, however, soon proved that they intended to depart, and the scouts were relieved, and rejoiced beyond measure, when the Comanches darted into the undergrowth, with the evident intention of mounting their mustangs and speeding east toward the settlements. They could see that it was a large war-party, and they recognized the chief as Rolling Thunder, a most bloodthirsty and vengeful savage.

They knew if they were discovered the captive could not be rescued, and that their own lives would be in jeopardy. They therefore remained crouched in the bushes, and listened intently.

Their practiced ears interpreted all the sounds that proceeded from the Indians aright and they felt positive that the red demons would soon leave the Rio San Saba.

Soon the scouts sprung to their feet and tore through the undergrowth, and up the rocky bank; presently standing over the suspended sufferer.

Each at once clutched a rope, and with words of cheer sounding in his ears, Daring Dick was drawn quickly upward, and seated upon the rocks, the cords being at once severed from his wrists.

"May Heaven bless and reward you!" said Dick, in a husky voice. "I believed myself doomed and had not the slightest hope of rescue. I owe you both my life, and I pay my debts!"

"Cuss my cats, pard, don't sling thet sort o' gab et we-uns. We purtends ter be humans, which we wouldn't be ef we wouldn't wade through bleed ter git yer out'n this hyer dif'kilty! Dang my dogs ef hit ain't Darin' Dick, o' ther Leon! Why didn't I know yer fu'st off?"

"By ther bleed o' Crockett, ye're right! Dick, how in ther dickens did yer git inter—" "Hus-sh!" came from the lips of Single Eye, in interruption.

The old scout had caught the sound of moving bushes below them on the opposite side of the river.

The next moment the Tonkaway chief bounded into the clear space, where so recently the main portion of the Comanche war-party had stood.

The eyes of Turtle were bent upward, and the trio on the cliff knew that he had seen and recognized them before he had made any movement.

Straight to the bank the Tonkaway bounded, and then stood erect a moment, gazing upward; his favorite ejaculation bursting from his lips:

"Waugh!"

"Dang my 'Merican heart, ef thar ain't ther Tonk!"

"Turtle, hit is, er I hopes ter be hashed an' fed ter Diggers, with bug an' grasshopper fixin's!"

Thus exclaimed the two scouts.

Only a moment did the chief stand thus. He then darted off, down the river, and disappeared in the shades. Soon a splash was heard, and the three men knew that Turtle was swimming the river, to join them.

Daring Dick felt little like talking, and his friends, perceiving this, readily excused him.

"Yer needn't ter sling any gab, Dick," said Old Rocky. "We-uns 'll take keer o' yer, an' fix up yer wounds. Reckon yer hed a nasty fight, all 'lone; an' ther hellyuns hev kerried off yer weapons. Thet's bad—I'm dog-goned ef hit ain't!"

"Hit's ornighly lucky though, thet ther ha'r-tarers skuted, er we'd hed a hefty rifle o' fun, gittin' yer up ther rocks. Whar in thunderation's Turtle?"

"Reckon he's gone ter git a peep et ther perrarer piruts," suggested Single Eye. "Turtle do love a Curmanach' like a cat hankers arter soap!"

The scouts stood beside Daring Dick, waiting for him to recover somewhat, before assisting him to their camp; their eyes sweeping the surrounding thickets and shades, for they suspected that some of the Indians remained behind.

Turtle did not join them for some time. Then he came, running rapidly, and halted directly in front of them, saying:

"Must go quick in dark wood. Comanche see horse trail on plain. Ride back fast. Know heap horse in bottom. Come!"

"My white brother heap sick. Must hide in bush. Talk no good on war-path. Waugh!"

"Wa-al, dang an' double dang my dogs!" exclaimed Single Eye. "Comin' back, air they! Skute, boyees—skute air ther word! Come, pard Dick; we'll all help you 'long."

"Cuss ther Curmanches!" put in Old Rocky. "Comin' back! Wa-al, I should twitter!"

The scouts assisted Daring Dick to his feet, and then from the cliff top into the timber; thence proceeding to their camp.

Before this was reached, however, a terrible yell rung through the natural arches.

Turtle had followed in the rear.

When the yell sounded, the scouts gazed back; when, to their surprise and concern, the Tonkaway had disappeared.

But, recalling the fact that the chief had not had his horse with him at the swell of the bend, they judged that he had gone to secure the animal, fearing that the Comanches would discover his favorite.

Soon they reached the camp of the old scouts, which was a small "open," surrounded by dense thickets.

The horses were found to be safe, and, giving no further thought to the Comanche war-party, the scouts dressed the wounds of Daring Dick, and supplied him with food and liquor to brace him up.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CHIEF MEETS GREASER.

TURTLE, the Tonkaway, when he parted from Daring Dick at the border of the San Saba timber near the bend to follow that half of the herd of horses that was in charge of the single Mexican, swam his black steed over the river and proceeded slowly on the trail, which was plainly defined, the undergrowth being broken and trampled.

We must bear in mind that the timber of the Rio San Saba extended for a quarter of a mile in distance from the river-banks on each side of the stream, the same being not only towering but draped with vines and moss; while beneath the undergrowth, which reached nearly to the lower limbs of the trees, was almost impassable, except by paths made by wild beasts.

Consequently, a regiment of soldiers could have, with caution, passed up or down the stream under cover of the timber on each side, and the presence of one regiment be unknown to the other, except through side scouts. Hence it will be understood how easily the different parties of which we write could have passed through the wood, or on the "open," without being aware of each other's presence.

The Tonkaway had not the slightest idea of the near presence of a Comanche war-party or he would have been wild with a thirst for revenge and scalps, and would have risked his life to gratify it. He would not have wasted time on the trail of the Mexican and the horses, but would have watched the war-party; and when the latter left their mustangs under guard of some few of the young braves, to witness the lowering of Daring Dick from the cliff, Turtle would have stampeded them, killed and scalped many of the young braves, and demoralized the Comanches generally.

This he could easily have done, and escaped. Indeed, he had performed many more daring and reckless feats since his squaw and pappoose had been captured and stoned to death by the Comanches.

It was quite a distance from the swell of the bend to the neck or entrance of the same, and as the way was difficult, it was fully an hour and a half before the chief reached a point near the herd of horses, the presence of which he could easily detect by their stamping and the whisking of their tails.

The animals were in quite a large natural opening in the timber, and had not this clear space been "struck" by the Greaser, they would have undoubtedly scattered in the timber—some of them making their way across the river and into the neck of the bend.

In such an event the Comanche war-party, which sped over the soft sward into the bend about the same time that Turtle arrived in the vicinity, would have discovered the animals and halted to secure them, and Daring Dick would have escaped capture. In short, it would have changed the run of affairs very greatly.

But this was not to be.

Not more than a pistol-shot ahead the sounds caused by the herd were noticed by the keen-eyed Tonkaway, who sprung from his black steed and secured it within a thicket. Then secreting his rifle, he stole forward toward the "open," his scalping-knife tightly clutched, and his eyes blazing at the thought of the treacherous Mexican who had been a party to the theft of the herd from his white friends.

From the time he had parted with Dick, Turtle had resolved that the Mexican should die.

Stealing through the bushes, panther-like, he drew nearer and nearer to the "open."

Small bars and arrows of moonlight shot through the foliage, partially illuminating his way.

As he neared the "open" the chieftain caught scent of a cigarette, and knew that he would soon discover the traitorous Greaser.

Sinking to the earth he wormed his way through the thickets until on the border of the opening.

Before him, and not ten paces from his position, the *vaquero*, who was a Mestizo or half-breed, lay upon an outspread blanket of many colors; his saddle being placed upon the same,

and he reclining against it, and smoking in an indolent manner.

The Greaser was a low-browed, villainous-looking man, with eyes that were unmistakably treacherous in expression, his skin very dark, his face ugly; and, if painted and garbed like an Apache, he would have passed for one, even among the braves of that savage and relentless tribe.

In fact, he was a "stab in the dark" character, as was evident at a glance.

He was now gazing, with great satisfaction, at the herd of mares; all of which had, upon their hams, the Mexican brands, with the comparatively fresh mark of Colonel Landers upon their shoulders.

Probably the Greaser was estimating the number of doubloons the animals would sell for in Mexico, and calculating the amount of his share.

The mares were in good condition, considering their rather rapid run from the Rio Leon.

Turtle, the Tonkaway, raised himself to a standing posture, straight as a lance-shaft; his head poised, and his muscles gathered in great knots, as he clutched his long scalping-knife his black eyes shooting hatred toward the recumbent figure.

All the kindness that had in the days past been extended to him by the colonel and Lola was brought to the front in the chief's mind, and served to infuriate him toward the treacherous Mexican, who, although in the employ of Colonel Landers, and trusted by him, had stolen the herd of horses, for caring for which he was paid and fed.

Turtle could have sprung forward and buried his knife in the Greaser's breast; but he scorned to take this advantage of a single foe whose fighting qualities he held in contempt. Gathering his great strength he made two bounds and clutching the *vaquero* by the collar of his *jaqueta*, he jerked him up and forward, hurling him some fifteen feet from where he had reclined.

The Greaser was so dumfounded and terrified that he did not gain the natural power of his muscles, and fell prostrate; but instantly sprung to his feet and faced the chief, his black eyes flashing with a murderous light, his swarthy lips curling away from his clinched white teeth in a beast-like manner, as he whipped out his knife.

But, as he saw the proud muscular form of the Tonkaway, and recognized in him a friend of Colonel Landers and Daring Dick, his dark face became ashen, and he actually, for a moment, quivered from head to foot in terrified amazement.

"Francisco heap bad Greaser," said Turtle, his keen gaze piercing the Mestizo to the very core. "Steal heap horses. Eat Chief Landers' meat. Take Chief Landers' silver. Live on Chief Landers' ranch, then steal all horses."

"Francisco heap bad. Must die. Turtle has spoken. Turtle is Tonkaway chief. Lies build not nests on the Turtle's tongue. It is good. Waugh!"

As he ended the Tonkaway stepped forward toward the Greaser; both arms hanging by his side, the muscles drawn, his hands clinched, the right about the handle of his knife, the long blade of which was held projecting up the back portion of his arm.

Instinctively the Mexican stepped backward, but realizing that there was no escape, that he was doomed to death did he not have the luck to get a chance for a mortal combat at his red foe—he became desperate and again assumed his beast-like expression as he jerked his thick, stiff sombrero from his head to serve as a shield, and held it in his left hand, his eyes glittering murderously as he hissed:

"*Carajo!* Francisco will split your heart, and hack your ears off!"

"Francisco will die with lies on his tongue," said the chief, in a deep, impressive voice.

Then he bounded directly in front of the Greaser, who was a powerfully formed man, with sinews of steel.

The bright moon shone into the "open," but the combatants were within the shade of the towering trees; and, as their knives clashed as rapidly as one could count, sparks of fire flying from the blades, glances of hatred and fury shot from the eyes of the pair.

Both were skillful with their weapons, but the arm of the Tonkaway was nerved by right and justice; and soon his blade slashed a deep gash in the left arm of the Mexican, whose sombrero shield flew from his hand.

"*Caramba!*" hissed the Mestizo, as he sprung forward, and caught at the bear-claw collar of Turtle with his left hand, the arm of which being now bleeding profusely. He then threw back his knife arm, the blade being over his shoulder; he, at the same instant, gathering his strength, and with electric-like velocity, he jabbed at the painted turtle on the breast of the chief.

But the Tonkaway was quicker, and warding off the blow with his arm, nearly paralyzing that of his antagonist, he buried his blade deep in the very heart of his yellow-skinned foe; the steel grating horribly, as it severed the ribs in its fatal course.

Turtle sprung backward, jerking free his knife from the breast of the Mexican; an arch of blood spurting from the gaping wound, and falling in red spray upon grass and flowers.

The Greaser fell backward upon the sward, his arms thrown upward, his fingers clinched and his face contorted in the agonies of death.

A moment Turtle stood erect, his knife dripping blood. Then he dexterously removed the scalp of his victim, circled the trophy over his plumed head, and sounded, but with low voice, the victory whoop of his tribe.

Hesitating not an instant, the chief swept his gaze over the herd of mares, that had gathered in a huddled mass on the opposite side of the "open," snorting with fright, but too weary to stampede unless urged on. Then the Tonkaway rushed to his horse, sprung astride, and crossing the river, passed through the timber, to the verge of the same; where, still sitting his steed, he parted the bushes, and gazed over the level grass-grown plain—the entrance to the great bend—but no indications could he perceive of the other portion of the herd, or of Antonio and his pard.

Then his gaze wandered instinctively eastward, and down into the great bend; when, from his lips, in the utmost of Indian amazement, mingled with concern, came his customary exclamation:

"Waugh!"

The next moment, his eyes were filled with satisfaction, but this soon changed to the most intense fury. The war-spirit of his people rushed to the front, and he urged his horse back over the San Saba; hastening to the trail of the herd, down which he sped as fast as the nature of the ground would admit, toward the swell of the big bend, and the Comanche war-party, which he had discovered from the body of the timber.

We have seen that Turtle arrived soon after Old Rocky and Single Eye had released Daring Dick from his fearful position.

When the chief crossed the river, he recalled the fact that the trail of the other half of the herd of mares had led out from the timber on the plain; and as the war-party had without doubt headed eastward, they would, even when at a gallop, perceive this wide, hard-trampled trail, which would not only cause them to halt, but to follow the plain "sign" back to San Saba. This would, of course, jeopardize the lives of his white pards.

He therefore hastened, at an Indian lope, through the belt of timber, in place of joining the scouts and Dick on the cliff.

When he arrived at the border of the wood, he congratulated himself at having thought of the probability he had entertained and acted upon; for the Comanches had indeed discovered the trail as they sped to the eastward, had halted, and were now galloping along the trail toward or back to the San Saba.

Turtle immediately hurried to join the scouts, and reported this, to them, unexpected danger, as has been recorded. Then, for some distance, he followed his white friends toward their camp, but being anxious in regard to his horse which he had left in a thicket on the west side of the river when he had approached the cliff, he plunged into the undergrowth and started to recover his favorite black steed and his rifle.

The Comanches, with exultant yells, galloped at speed along the trail of the herd, and they knew that the white man they had captured had been on that trail when he was seen by them.

They also, by examination, when they "struck" the soft bottom-sward and lit torches, discovered that there were but two men driving the mares.

Upon finding this their yells ceased, for they also detected that the trail was fresh—that the herd could be but a short distance away.

This fresh discovery caused Rolling Thunder to order his braves into camp, and they crossed the river some little distance west of the swell of the bend, and encamped at the point where he had left their mustangs when witnessing the lowering of their captive down the cliff.

A half-dozen warriors were at once dispatched on the trail of the herd, with orders to kill the two men who had the animals in charge, and then drive the beasts down the bend and into the camp.

Another brave was dispatched to ascertain if the suspended captive was suffering sufficiently, and he soon returned with the startling report that the young Texan had escaped.

Rolling Thunder was furious, and at once ordered a half-dozen braves to scour the bottom-timber in search of the captive, whom the Comanches were determined to retake and torture.

The camp of the war-party was situated in the extreme swell of the timber-line of the big bend.

CHAPTER XIX.

IN THE COMANCHE CAMP.

TURTLE, the Tonkaway, succeeded in reaching his horse, mounting the same, and gaining a position on the south portion of the swell of the bend, just east of the point where the Comanches crossed the stream and encamped.

Indeed the war-party crossed within fifty

paces of where the chief sat, his breast swelled out, his head defiantly poised, and his black eyes flashing.

Few men would have dared remain in such close proximity to a horde of hostile enemies; but not a trace of fear, or even concern, was betrayed on the stoical face of the Tonkaway. Strange to record, he deliberately opened his paint-bag, secured his little mirror, and renewed the streaks, lines, and bars of war, on his face, breast, and arms; adding long fresh stripes of vermilion from shoulder to wrist—the stripes at the last-named point entering a wide ring of black pigment, and giving to the Tonkaway a truly horrible appearance.

From this, and the expression of the chief's eyes, it was evident that he meditated some desperate undertaking; that, although he was alone, he meant that his enemies should know, to their cost, that he was in their vicinity; and that he had not forgotten the tragic death of his squaw and pappoose at their hands.

Having painted himself to his satisfaction, Turtle dismounted, secured his horse, and with great caution crawled amid the undergrowth to the verge of the same. It was quite dark at that portion of the bottom-timber; but, beyond it, the moon lit up the "open" of the bend brightly.

Before him was the Comanche camp. In fact, the first fire was not ten yards away.

The mustangs of the Indians were feeding just beyond the line of fires, the same being near the curving line of timber.

Much to the joy of Turtle, the horse of Daring Dick was feeding directly at the border of the bushes, not three yards from where he sat; and, as yet, neither saddle nor bridle had been removed.

But scarce five minutes had elapsed, after the discovery of Dick's horse, when the Tonkaway perceived a sub-chief, upon whose head flaunted two eagle-feathers, approaching the horse; and, to add to the joy of our red friend, he saw that this warrior had the arms of Dick, belted about his waist. He had, doubtless, been the leader in the capture of the young Texan, and had claimed the horse and arms, as his by right of capture.

Desperate and dangerous as was the undertaking, Turtle determined at once, that he would not only recapture the horse, but also the arms of his white brother.

This would have seemed impossible, and the attempt foolishly reckless, by any other probably, than the Tonkaway. But the latter was fixed in his purpose.

He tightened his belt, jerked his scalping-knife from the scabbard, and then as the sub-chief advanced, and was about to take the horse of Dick by the bridle-rein to lead the animal away, Turtle imitated to perfection the call of a hen turkey to her young, and also the cries of the young turkeys; at the same time, slightly disturbing the bushes.

The Comanche sprang at once into the undergrowth, stooping, at a clear space, to pick up a piece of deadwood, with which to knock over the young turkeys.

But at that instant, the terrible Tonkaway sprang, panther-like, upon the sub-chief; his hand clutching his throat, and his knife, with sickening sound, being plunged to the hilt in the Indian's side.

Then Turtle instantly relinquished his hold upon the knife-handle, clasping both his hands about the Comanche's throat, to stifle the death-yell. Both rolled over and over, the wounded savage writhing like a snake, his arms wildly beating the air—the muscles rendered lax and limp by the hand of death, and unable to retain their hold upon his foe.

But a very short time did the victim of the Tonkaway thus struggle.

Feebler and feebler became his writhings, and then followed a few spasmodic contractions of the muscles; and, with a horrible gurgling sound, the form of the sub-chief, straightened out rigid, and then lay limp and lifeless.

Quickly the Tonkaway drew out his knife, circled the point of the blade about his victim's head, and tore off the reeking scalp.

Securing the belt of arms about his own waist, Turtle lost no time, but returned to his point of observation.

To his relief, the Indians were engaged in devouring half-cooked horse-meat, like ravenous wolves; they having killed an extra animal.

To his further satisfaction, the horse of Daring Dick was browsing upon the very bushes in which he himself was concealed.

Instantly the chief thrust out his arm, and placed his hand upon the animal's muzzle; at the same time, speaking to the horse in a low tone.

The beast snuffed, and rubbed its nose against Turtle's hand; having, evidently, gotten scent of the Tonkaway previously, and recognizing him as a friend.

Sweeping the camp with keen gaze, Turtle was about to lead the horse into the bushes; when a warrior came, on the rush, from the direction of the cliff and the river, and halting before Rolling Thunder, spoke, interlarding his words with gestures, and pointing toward the torture scene.

The chief knew that this brave was reporting the fact that the white captive was gone—that their victim was no longer hanging from the cliff.

In an instant, all was confusion, and with the exception of about a dozen braves, all rushed into the shades, toward the cliff, the Comanche chief included.

This was the opportunity for Turtle, and he immediately took action.

Leading the horse of Dick slowly into the undergrowth, the Tonkaway sprang into the saddle, and proceeded at once to the river. This he crossed, and then secreted the animal some little distance from the stream, in a dense thicket of wild plums.

Then he returned to his own horse, passing over the San Saba, in the interlocked branches of the trees, which there arched the waters.

Mounting his black steed, and knowing that he had no time to lose, the chief urged the animal to the border of the timber and undergrowth, drew his revolver, and one of Daring Dick's, and with a six-shooter in each hand, made ready for the desperate undertaking he had determined upon, previous to the main portion of the Comanches having left the camp, and the discovery of Dick's horse.

The dozen warriors, who were left in the camp, were now gathered in a group, jabbering in their guttural lingo, and showing as much excitement as Indians ever display outwardly.

This was occasioned by the mysterious and now inexplicable disappearance of the captive, whom they had suspended from the cliff.

Turtle waited not a moment, but uttered a low and peculiar sound; at the same time, pressing both his knees upon the shoulders of his horse.

Like an arrow from a bow, the noble black shot from the screen of bush and branch, out into the camp, directly toward the knot of warriors; and, before they recovered from their astonishment at the sight of the lone Tonkaway chief charging into their camp; the wild war-whoop of Turtle filled their ears, and awoke the echoes of the Rio San Saba.

This was followed by a rattling discharge from the chief's revolvers.

Death-yells, signal-whoops, and the monotonous death-chant of mortally wounded braves, filled the air.

Eight warriors fell in their tracks, dead or dying without having time or chance to spring for their bows, arrows, or lances; the others bounding into the dark shades, as though the bad spirit of their traditions was in hot pursuit!

Turtle, the Tonkaway, was the sole occupant, except the dying braves, of the Comanche camp—the camp of his most deadly enemies, whose hatred for him was only equaled by his for them.

At once springing to the earth, Turtle ended the death-song of the wounded, by plunging his knife into their breasts. Then scalping every one of them, he bounded, with all his reeking trophies, upon his black steed.

Then there shot out from the Tonkaway's throat, his far-sounding yell of victory, triumph, taunt, and derision; after which, he sped to the north side of the bend, and on through the timber, to the river. This he forded, while the mad and vengeful whoops of the war-party filled his ears, and rung up and down the natural arches of the San Saba.

Turtle rode, in a quartering course to the eastward, soon reaching the border of the timber, along which he passed south, and around the swell of the bend and the cliff. Thence he dashed into the wood, on the south side of the bend, while the Comanches were howling for his blood on the north side, where he had left a plain trail.

Securing Daring Dick's horse, having accomplished wonders, Turtle proceeded toward the point where the scouts had headed, when conducting Dick to their camp—a signal well known to him, from old Old Rocky, who heard his approach being answered by the chief—and the next minute, the Tonkaway, mounted upon his faithful steed, and leading that of Daring Dick, rode up to the trio, whom he found standing in an intensely excited state outside the circle of thickets, within which was their camp.

"Wa-al, cuss my cats!" exclaimed Old Rocky, in the utmost amazement and relief; "Turtle, yer's a brick—a gold brick et thet! Yer hes raised a rumpus, es usual."

"Double up an' dang me! Bake me with dogs, an' feed me ter Pinte papposes!" was the fervent expression of Single Eye; the same feelings being manifested in voice and manner.

"Chuck me inter ther Souse Lakes fer 'gators ter bash me inter cat-fish bait, ef ther Tonk hain't bin an' got yer nag an' shooters away from ther red bellyuns, pard Dick!"

"Reckon yer hed ter salerwate some on 'em, Turtle. Fac' air, by ther yells, I shu'd perced ter opine yer hed laid some consider'ble on 'em out cold."

Daring Dick stepped to the side of Turtle's horse and grasped the hand of the chief, shaking it warmly, as he said:

"Turtle, I am getting deeper in your debt than I can ever repay, I fear. Ten thousand thanks to you, my red brother, for recapturing my horse and arms!"

"You are recklessly brave—indeed, too risky—and I fear you will never see the Rio Leon, if you keep on in this way."

"Too much heap talk," returned the Tonkaway. "Talk no good on war-path. Here pistols"—passing the revolvers, with bowie and belt, to Dick—"No like see Comanches wear my white brother's pistols: Kill, scalp. Let my white brothers look,"—throwing nine scalps at the feet of the scouts—"Francisco, he scalp there. Bad Greaser. Steal horses chief Landers."

"Come! My white brothers must ride up river. Woods full Comanches in few minutes. Must ride quick. Know where horses. Make stampede in Comanche camp."

"Come! It is good. Give scalps to Turtle. Good for quiver. Come. Waugh!"

With muttered ejaculations of wonder, the two scouts returned to the Tonkaway chief the gory trophies, and sprang to equip their animals in haste: knowing there was no time to lose, for the yells of the Indians drew nearer and nearer.

The sound of the same proved that the Comanches were infuriated, to a murderous degree even beyond control or prudence—otherwise they would have searched the bottom-timber in silence.

In five minutes more, the quartette were galloping up the river, on the south side of the bend, and toward the neck of the same, at headlong speed.

CHAPTER XX.

THE TRAITOROUS GREASERS TAKEN.

THE fury of Rolling Thunder and his warriors upon discovering that their victim had been released, was intense.

They could not account for it.

They had observed no one near, neither had they seen any "sign," except that of two men, who had driven the herd of horses up the San Saba, on the south side of the bend; and it was unreasonable to suppose that one of these had returned to rescue the suspended man from torture and death.

However, as the captive had been on the trail of the herd when taken, it was possible that notwithstanding the great danger of such a step, one of the *vaqueros*, who was presumably his friend, might have returned, and released him.

Yells of baffled rage rung from all sides, as the braves gazed up at the cliff side, all honey-combed with caverns, and illumined by the bright moon, and saw that their captive was really gone.

Their fury and excitement at this was, however, as naught compared to the insane rage and utter amazement that ruled them, as the rattling reports of Turtle's revolvers reached their ears, mingled with the death-yells and signal-whoops of the warriors who had been left in camp.

With a most demoniac howl of fury, Rolling Thunder bounded from the open belt into the timber, and toward his camp, followed by his braves, all crashing through the undergrowth, and heedless of thorns and the whisking of branch and bush.

When they reached the camp, and saw their fellow-braves, lying scalped, gore-stained, and dead, near a camp-fire, their rage knew no bounds.

The Comanche chief yelled his orders at once, and a score of warriors clutched bows and quivers, and sprang in all directions, except the west toward the "open" of the bend, in search of the detested Tonkaway, whose taunting whoop of victory they had recognized when near the cliff.

They now believed that they knew who had released the captive.

One of the braves stumbled over the corpse of the sub-chief, and uttered a howl, as he dragged it out from the bushes into the moonlight, which caused the rage of all to break out afresh.

They had good cause to remember Turtle, and equally so his fellow-avenger, Rattlesnake; no war-party ever having been known to succeed, when either of these Tonkaway chiefs got upon the trail.

Indeed, the Comanches had so often believed that they had slain these two arch-enemies of theirs—many times really capturing them for torture, only to have them escape, or be released by some of their white jads—and so many warriors had been slain and scalped by the red avengers mentioned, that they were now looked upon with much superstition, and believed to be guarded by the Good Spirit, or the Bad, they knew not which.

This feeling, however, was not entertained by Rolling Thunder, who strove to banish it from the minds of his braves; but every time they heard the dread Tonkaway war-whoop, it returned, and tended to demoralize them.

Now, nine of their warriors had been slain by Turtle—one of these a sub-chief—and four by the unknown white man, who had just escaped.

All these braves dead, and not an enemy slain, or captured for the torture!

The fury of the survivors was terrible, and Rolling Thunder found it difficult to force them to silence, he knowing that nothing could be ac-

complished did they betray their presence during the search.

Soon, however, all was silent in the camp, and in the woods surrounding.

Hours passed thus; the braves, one by one returning, unsuccessful in finding any trace of either the Tonkaway or the released captive.

It was ascertained that the horse of the latter had been taken from the camp.

This was laid to the door of the Tonkaway, as he had slain and scalped Black Fox, the sub-chief, and taken the captive's belt of weapons.

The dead were all laid side by side, and an hour after midnight, as all the searching braves had returned, a guard was stationed, Rolling Thunder believing that the trail of Turtle would be found in the morning, and also that the warriors, who had been dispatched up the river, would capture the herd of horses.

If there was as large a number as he had calculated by the trail, the chief determined to start back to his village, and not make a raid on the settlements; for, even he was impressed with the idea that it was an unlucky moon for the war-path.

All except the guard lay down to sleep, as silent and motionless as the corpses of their brother braves, which lay, stark and stiff, near at hand.

Daring Dick's wounds had been dressed in a skillful manner by Old Rocky, who stanching the blood, bathed the stab and furrow, and applied healing salve.

Dick then satisfied his hunger, and when Turtle put in an appearance the young man was again in tolerable condition.

Our four friends galloped on the soft sward along the southern border of the San Saba timber and up the river at full speed, not having been discovered by any of the Comanche searchers.

Turtle informed his white pards in regard to his having discovered that portion of the stampeding herd which had been driven up the north side of the bend by Francisco, and that he had left them in the same "open" where he had slain the Mexican.

The scouts concluded that Antonio and Juan had driven their half of the herd also to the neck of the bend, but on the south side of the entrance, with a view of rejoining Francisco, which perhaps had been prevented by their discovering the Comanches.

They soon reached the entrance referred to, where they perceived Juan and Antonio fast asleep upon blankets near the border of the timber-cove, and stealthily the four avengers advanced, taking up positions, two at the heads of the sleepers, and two at the feet—each with a cocked revolver in his hand.

Then, at a signal from Old Rocky, Turtle shot out a war-whoop.

The Greasers sprung to a sitting posture in terror and bewilderment at finding four deadly tubes leveled at their heads. The first glance revealed to the treacherous thieves Daring Dick and the Tonkaway, and they knew that they were doomed.

Both turned pale and trembled with the fright that overpowered them.

"Why did you drive off the colonel's horses, and where were you intending to go with them, Antonio?" demanded Dick, sternly.

"Mercy, Senior Dick! Are you the devil, that you find us so soon? I call all the saints to witness that I wanted not the mares!"

"King Kent gave me a hundred pesos to drive them to the Rio San Saba. He promised to meet me here, but in his place you come. I wish I was back at the ranch. Have you seen Francisco, Senior Dick?"

"Francisco has gone to his fathers," put in the Tonkaway. "Turtle's knife found his heart!"

Both Greasers shuddered.

Meanwhile Old Rocky and Single Eye picked up two lariats and began to tie nooses in one of the ends of each.

The Mexicans detected this, and became still more terrified.

"Are you willing to make oath that King Kent bribed you to drive off the mares?" asked Dick.

"St, Senior Dick. He is a bad man, and he got us drunk. Mercy, senior! You would not hang us like dogs?"

"You deserve it, and I presume the Vigilantes of the Leon will decide to string you up. Pards, I think we had better tie them to their saddles and take them with us. King Kent has gone too far.

"Here we have proof of his villainy, which will hang him, even without what Turtle and I can testify. We will stop him now in his criminal career.

"His enmity toward the Landers family and myself is on account of his being, as he thinks, in love with Miss Lola.

"King Kent is capable of any crime in the calendar, but we have him in our power now, and will take advantage of it. Let us secure these two wretches and take them back to the Leon."

"I sh'ud asserwate an opine thet ther condemned yaller skunks orter be hung up ter dry,

right hyer," said Old Rocky, spitting viciously; "but I reckon you knows best, Dick."

"Jist so," put in Single Eye; "I hankers ter jark ropes, wi' ther or'nary Mex' scum onter ther cends o' them!"

"Turtle say King Kent snake. Say snake jump, bite. Turtle tongue not forked. Dick, his talk good. Tie Greaser dogs to horses.

"Mebbe so go back on trail to Leon. Mebbe so Comanche torture. Mebbe so capture King Kent. Then hang all to tree."

"I declare, I didn't think of that!" exclaimed Dick. "You are right, Turtle. If the miscreant is expected here, we'll be on the lookout for him, and we'll make short work of him and them.

"Tie them up, pards, and make sure you tie knots that will not slip."

"Wa-al, I sh'ud snicker ef I didn't!" said Old Rocky, as he bound Juan.

"An' I sh'ud puke up my toe-nails ef Antone gut away, arter my leetle job of rope tyin'," asserted Single Eye.

The Mexicans considered themselves very fortunate, thus to gain a respite; probably deciding that while there was life there was hope.

When they were securely bound, the Tonkaway spoke:

"Turtle say have talk, council-talk, when find horses. More horses over there,"—pointing across the neck of the bend. "Turtle say drive horses together. Drive down to big bend. Heap horses.

"Comanche go sleep. Stampede horses into Comanche camp. Make Comanche mustang heap scare. All stampede over braves. Then turn out on prairie.

"My white brothers yell heap. Turtle he yell heap. Ride in camp with stampede. Comanche heap scare. Shoot heap. Kill heap. Yell heap. Break up Comanche war-party. It is good. Waugh!"

"Wa-al, may I be eternally bamboozled, ef yer hain't struck the bull's-eye, Turtle! I sw'ar thet's jist ther ticket! Ef yer skin air red, an' ye're sparse in edicash, I'm layin' every pica-yune on yer fer fresh idees. What d'yer say, boyees?"

"Dang my dorgs, ef thet ain't jist ther game what we-uns kin play, an' win! Fac' air, we kin sweep ther board; an' ef Ole Rollin' Thunder don't lose his ha'r in ther rumpus, he'll be 'bleeged ter roll clean hum ter his village, fer we-uns hes gut deadwood on scoopin' in all his critters, ef we keep our peepers peeled. What's yer opine, pard Dick?"

"Shall we not lose these horses of the colonel's in the stampede?"

"Nary a lose, Dick!" asserted Old Rocky. "Why, cuss my cats, we'll corral 'bout sixty mustangs o' ther red hellyuns, ter drive back Leon-ways!"

"Thet's 'bout ther—"

A hiss from the Tonkaway here interrupted Single Eye, and Turtle, in a low voice, said:

"Drag Greasers in bush quick. Comanche come. War-path open. War-cry on lips."

The next instant, the two Mexicans, trembling as if stricken with ague after hearing the words of the chief, were dragged into the adjacent thicket—all our friends crouching there beside them.

Not a single suspicious sound was to be heard; yet not one of the whites doubted that the Comanches were near, after Turtle's assertion.

Thus they remained for a couple of minutes before any indications of the enemy were noticed, although the scouts listened intently.

Then the neighing of a mustang came from the eastward.

This proved that Rolling Thunder had sent out some of his braves on the trail of the horses.

The question most important to the scouts now was—how many warriors were there?

All knew that a desperate knife-fight was before them. One thing was certain—not an Indian must be allowed to go back to the camp.

All must die, even if firearms had to be used.

It was just possible that the reports of the revolvers might not be heard in the camp of Rolling Thunder.

All waited in breathless expectation the coming of the Comanche trailers, who, having followed the trail of the stampeding mares amid the dense timber, had not arrived as soon as our friends.

The latter had galloped, as we know, on clear ground on the border of the timber, unseen and unheard by the Indians.

CHAPTER XXI.

A FATHER'S ANGUISH.

LOLA LANDERS and Edna Edwards were both wearied nearly to illness, before the first long gallop up the Leon ended, and the Basin Bandits for rest and breakfast, and to allow their animals to graze; just as the Southern sun arose in all its glory above the eastern horizon.

But the spirit of Edna was far from being broken.

She was still defiant and hopeful.

The threats of King Kent in connection with Daring Dick had served to render Lola, on the

other hand, almost insane with concern, more for her lover than for herself.

She knew well, upon reflection, that the parricide had made no vain boast—that Dick had been lured from the ranch purposely, not only to prevent him from protecting her, or following fast with a force on the trail of her abductors, but that they might have an opportunity to kill him, when he would have no chance to successfully defend himself against such a strong force.

Taking into consideration the dastardly character of King Kent, Lola had no doubt that he would effect the capture of Daring Dick by strategy and then torture him as he had threatened.

The poor girl's brain became like molten metal at the dread imaginings, the awful probabilities that the terrible near future promised; she, eventually, praying for death to relieve her from the torments of mind she endured.

Reared in luxury, as far as such a thing was possible on the border, her every wish catered to by her indulgent father, and with an extremely delicate and most sensitive nature—the reader can but faintly imagine the fearful torment of mind the poor maiden suffered, situated as she was.

And these two young girls, so unlike in disposition, and of such widely different types of beauty, had great influence even upon those lawless, crime-stained outlaws. They admired Edna for her "sand," as they expressed it; meaning her courage and defiance amid such dangerous surroundings.

As for Lola, so refined, guileless and child-like was she, they were forced, in spite of themselves, to sympathize with, and pity her.

This influence the maidens unconsciously exerted over the rough bandits, and it was most fortunate for them. King Kent detected it but dared not carry his taunts and threats too far, lest his followers might break out in open rebellion against him.

Doubtless he would have proceeded to extremes and brought both of his fair captives to helpless illness had not his men manifested by their looks and actions their undoubted sympathy with the maidens.

Yet the miscreant swore mentally that he would not be balked in his aims and desires, when a reasonable time and place were favorable; even should he be forced to maintain his command by shooting down some of his men.

King Kent had become a very demon, since his crowning criminal act, the murdering of his father.

He knew that death, an ignominious death by the rope, would be his doom, should he be overtaken by the rancheiros of the Leon and Brazos; therefore the horses would be pressed to the greatest possible speed after leaving the timber.

Thus he decided.

No longer was there the least fear of death, except by the rope, in his mind; his manner being overbearing to all except Big Bill, upon whom he relied greatly.

All realized the change in their leader, and wondered not. Indeed they would not have been the least surprised had he blown his own brains out, their amazement having been only that he had not gone hopelessly insane after his most unnatural crime.

But the parricide kept himself braced up continually by deep potations, and should the liquor give out, he would indeed become a raging madman.

As short as possible, and at the same time allow the horses to graze sufficient to sustain them, was the first halt, and then, agreeably to the orders of King Kent, and to the inclinations of his followers, all sped at a terrific gallop away from the Rio Leon. But, when afar out on the plain, they turned and kept a course parallel with the stream, and to the southwest.

By thus proceeding, they could gain sight of any who might pursue a long distance away, and be ready to receive, or to avoid them.

The poor maidens were thus greatly fatigued, although their bonds had been removed, and they were permitted to guide their own horses, but still kept in the midst of the outlaw horde.

Lola had refused the food that had been placed before her; but, through the persuasion of Edna, she was induced to eat, that she might keep up her strength. Edna, though she had but little hope remaining, constantly spoke words of cheer, asserting that Daring Dick and Turtle were not only well able to take care of themselves, and avoid death or capture, but might effect their release.

She expatiated upon the daring skill and bravery of the Tonkaway chief, who would make superhuman efforts with Dick to rescue them, did they discover that they were captives to the Basin Bandits.

She also bade Lola base hope upon the following up of their abductors by her father, and the rancheiros, who had collected on account of the murder of Captain Knowles. The fair girl became at last somewhat hopeful, from the words of her friend, and for a time this hope nerved both the maidens to bear up. But, as on and on, through that day and the next, the headlong speed was maintained, bodily fatigue and suffer-

ing told upon them. They lost their color, becoming wan and worn, and their eyes assumed an unnatural and glassy appearance.

Ere long the Basin Bandits arrived at the confluence of the San Saba and the Colorado.

It was now midnight of the same night during which the exciting scenes occurred at the big bend of the former stream.

Fording the Colorado, below the junction of the two rivers, they continued, at a slow pace, along the margin of the timber of the San Saba; following the trail of the herd of mares, as had Daring Dick and Turtle, the Tonkaway.

When Mickey McCafferty recovered from the terrible blow he had received, which was some time after, he sat up bewildered, and looked about him for his battered "plug" hat.

This he crammed on the back of his "cabase," and strode, at a lively pace to the ranch, muttering to himself, as he went:

"Be the piper o' Ballyhack! But there bees the devil's own doin's goin' on. The murderin' blackguards, that's been stalin' horses an' sich, hes carried away the ger-ruls; but, bedad, I'll be afther ridin' for the captain's, an' it's ourselves that'll go for thim!"

"Be gobs, I niver was much of a sojer, but it's Mickey McCafferty that'll fight like the devil for the ger-ruls. But, musha, what'll the colonel be afther sayin' when he hears that Miss Lola's been run away, wid? Sure, he'll curse everything black an' blue, an' ride on the thrail like a wild Injun!"

Without informing the negroes of the abduction, the Irishman equipped the fastest horse at the ranch, sprung into the saddle, and galloped toward the Brazos ford. The steed plunged into, and through the river, raising a shower of spray; and then on, down to Knowles Ranch, where a crowd of rancheeros had met, to attend the murdered man's funeral.

Galloping at full speed into the midst of the assemblage, nearly riding down and trampling some of the men who clutched the bridle-reins, thinking Mickey had gone mad, he yelled, as he caught sight of Colonel Landers:

"Thunder an' turf, colonel! Sure's the devil's till pay, an' no pitch ho', at the ranch beyant! Be cripes, thin, but Miss Lola an' Miss Edna Edwards has bin tuk by the devils o' thaves, an' carried aff entirely. Sure the blackguards knocked me es blind es a bat; er be the hole in me coat, I'd ha' battered the hids o' thim!"

Colonel Landers rushed forward, and dragged Mickey from the saddle, demanding:

"What do you mean? What are you trying to say? Are you crazy, McCafferty?"

"May the curse o' Cromwell rist on me sowl, if the ger-ruls ain't run away wid! An' it's be the horse-thaves, that sprung onto me, when Miss Lola an' Miss Edna was shootin', in the woods below the ranch.

"Sure I was almost kilt intirely, meself; an' whin I come till meself, I galloped like the very devil, to tell yees."

"Which way did they go? Gentlemen, King Kent is at the bottom of this. The fiend, who shot his own father, has stolen my child!"

Edwards also sprung forward with Colonel Landers, and throwing his arms in the air, came near falling to the earth.

"Merciful Father!" he cried out, in his agony of soul; "preserve my pet, my Edna, from those fiends!"

"Death to King Kent!"

"String up the condemned cuss!"

"Choke ther life out'n ther or'nary bellyun what shot his own dad!"

"Death ter ther boss an' gal thieves!"

Such were the cries that came from many, in furious, vengeful rage.

"How in the devil's name d'ye think I cu'd tell which way the thaves wint, an' me layin' there widout sinse or r'ason? All I kin tell is, that they cum up the Laon, be gobs!"

This answer Mickey gave to the colonel and others.

A moment after, all was confusion, the rancheeros rushing for their horses.

Colonel Landers and Mr. Edwards were first in the saddle.

Then it was that a well-known rancheero, who had served with the Texas Rangers, galloped headlong down the river, as had Mickey McCafferty.

All gathered, upon their horses, filled with surprise and curiosity.

Jerking his horse to his haunches, the ex-ranger yelled:

"Boyees, I've foun' the trail whar, I reckon, ther boss-stealers hangs out! Hit leads down towards whar ther San Saba runs inter ther Brazos, an' I reckon we'll find 'em in ther crotch o' ther drinks."

A yell of satisfaction burst from the assembled rancheeros.

"Lead on!—for God's sake, lead on, Jim Ricord! The fiends have carried off my daughter and Edna Edwards! Oh, Heavens! I shall go mad!"

Mr. Edwards could only groan in his anguish.

Then all galloped headlong toward the ford,

leaving the negroes howling over the corpse of Captain Knowles—the funeral being broken up.

It was now long past sunset, and hours were spent, with torch-lights, following the trail. This was difficult to trace, even by daylight, and when the rancheeros reached the basin, the birds had flown.

They were, therefore, forced to encamp in the outlaws' stronghold until morning, when the fresh "sign" of the departing bandits was discovered. Not only this, but shreds of the dresses of Lola and Edna were found on the thorns of the bushes, thus proving to the rancheeros that they were on the right trail to rescue the abducted maidens.

But the progress of the trailers was slow, in comparison with that made by the pursued, as after leaving the vicinity of the Leon, the bandits had sped over the soft, springy sward, and the season being dry, it was an easy matter to keep the run of the "sign."

The consequence was that the rescuers and avengers of the Brazos and Leon were more than a day's journey in the rear, when King Kent and his followers, with their fair captives, proceeded toward the big bend in the night-time, after crossing the Rio Colorado.

CHAPTER XXII.

PREPARING FOR THE ATTACK.

OLD ROCKY, Single Eye, Daring Dick, and the Tonkaway crouched in the bushes, awaiting the advent of the Comanche trailers.

The two Greasers, Antonio and Juan, lay bound and helpless, in abject terror; for they now feared that their captors would steal away in the undergrowth, and that the Indians finding them, would torture them to death.

Except the sounds which proceeded from the herd, which were continuous, and the usual natural noises of the night, naught could be heard by the Comanches, to indicate the near presence of human beings.

There was only one thing which gave our friends any concern. This was the possibility that the Indian trailers would discover their horses, which were secured but a short distance from the point where the neighing of the mustang had sounded.

The latter had evidently gotten the scent of the horses of the scouts.

As the silence continued, Turtle could not remain inactive with this concern on his mind; and he sunk to the earth, crawling toward the spot where the horses had been left, saying not a word, nor giving a hint of his intentions. But the scouts well knew his object. Here and there the moon shot down bars of silvery light through the foliage, which was less dense here than below them.

Turtle soon reached the vicinity of the animals; and, as it happened, just in the nick of time, for he discovered, crawling toward the thicket in which the beasts were secured, a Comanche brave; the war-painted face of the trailer being, for a moment plainly revealed.

The presence of the animals in the thicket was betrayed by their stamping, and the whisking of their tails at the flies that tormented them.

Silent as a serpent and with movements just like one, the Tonkaway wound his way with the object of intercepting the creeping trailer, whose attention was centered upon the thicket.

A low "Ugh" came from the Comanche, and revealed the fact to Turtle, that the former had entered the thicket, was examining the horses by feeling them with his hands, and had found that they were saddled and bridled.

It was now quite dark around them.

Turtle arose to his feet, and drew his scalping-knife, but at that very moment a furious snort struck his ears; and then came a fearful crashing of the bushes, followed by an awful yell of agony.

Close following this, came a terrible stamping, as of a horse rearing upward, and dashing its hoofs forward. Then came a death-howl, and the crashing of bones.

The Tonkaway sprung into the thicket, and striking a light, cast the same upon the dry leaves, which he blew gently, and the same blazed upward, lighting the thicket that surrounded him.

It lit up a strange and horrible scene.

"Skip-Lively," the horse of Single Eye, stood with its solitary optic blazing like the orbs of an infuriated panther, its fore hoofs gory, and imbedded in the mangled body of the Comanche. Its jaws were closed tight in the shoulder of the brave, whose face—the only portion of him that was unscathed—was contorted in terror and agony. The fierce beast had trampled him to death—indeed, had broken every bone in his body!

With a "Waugh" of intense satisfaction, blended with astonishment, although this was not the first time he had known the strange horse to do a like deed, the Tonkaway turned to kick out the fire, when five Comanches, with exultant whoops of war, sprung into the "open," and hurled themselves upon the red chief whom they so hated and feared.

But close at their heels bounded the two old scouts and Daring Dick.

The scene that followed beggars description.

There was no opportunity to use revolvers.

Steel glittered and gleamed in the fire-light, clashing in a terrible manner; Turtle, the whites, and the Comanches, being mingled in a writhing mass, their arms and legs interlocked, throats clutched, and sounds of deep panting and gurgling mingling with the clash of steel.

The scouts had the advantage, as they sprung upon the Indians from the rear, and their fury was intense at perceiving the great danger of their red pard. The conflict was brief. In a minute all was over, and then the five Comanches lay dead, with many gaping wounds, and covered with blood, upon the carpet of leaves.

The horses were all rearing in fright, except Skip-Lively; this strange animal still keeping its jaws closed upon the shoulder of its victim.

The victory-whoop of the Tonkaway chief rung through the timber as he proceeded to scalp the dead.

"Whoop, hooray! Bully fer Skip!" sung out Single Eye, exultantly. "Jist gaze et thet, boyees! Ther only fault I find wi' Skip, he doesn't skin heads. Ef he'd take ther scalps o' his victims, I'd hev 'em hung onter his mano an' tale fer ornaments."

"Dang me, ef yer nag ain't on ther war-path ag'in, old pard!" said Old Rocky, in admiration. "I swar hit does git me chuck-full o' surpriso ter see how he takes reds in cuten ther dew. He's a warrior—Skip air—an' he orter hev ther eagle-feathers of a chief onter his head."

"Old Rocky talk heap good. Horse, he warrior. Have eagle-feathers. Kill Comanche quick with hoofs. Comanche heap scare. Yell like sick squaw. Skip best horse in Texas. Waugh!"

Daring Dick had heard the scouts speak of this peculiarity of Single Eye's horse. Now he had proof before his eyes of the animal's skill in making 'way with hostiles, and he looked on in wonder until the scout went up to his steed, patted the animal, and spoke some words of commendation.

Skip-Lively then released his grip on the dead Comanche, and rubbed his head against his master's shoulder. Turtle jerked away the mangled corpse and scalped it, as he had done the others.

"That was the most remarkable scro I ever witnessed," said Dick; "I always thought you were fooling me when you told about that horse killing Indians. It is wonderful. I see, however, he has no hatred toward Turtle, though his skin is red."

"Skip thinks a heap o' Turtle, though he knows a 'Pache or a Curmanch by ther scent. But I see yer' slashed up a leetle, pard Dick. I'll jist mash some prickly-pear, an' sock it onter ther cut."

Not one of the party, it was found on examination, had escaped knife-wounds, though none of them severe ones.

Old Rocky unloosed the horses, and led them to the timber-cove where the herd were, and Turtle hastened through the bottom-timber, soon entering the cove with the mustangs of the Comanches, the animals being equipped with the peculiar saddles of that tribe and the usual jaw-straps of buffalo-skin.

The chief then spoke:

"Turtle ride fast. Drive other horses here. Old Rocky, Single Eye tie dead braves to saddles of mustangs. Stampede into Comanche camp."

"Make Rolling Thunder heap mad. Make young braves heaps scare. It is good. Waugh!"

Bounding upon his black steed, the Tonkaway galloped out on the plain, to drive the other portion of the herd of mares to the timber-cove—thus re-uniting the stampeded animals of Colonel Landers.

"Thet's a hunky idee o' ther Tonk's," asserted Old Rocky; "I reckon ther Curmanches air 'scut chuck-full o' hyderphobic, pard Dick, et your gittin' clear?"

"I'll never forget what you did for me—"

"Thet'll do o' thet sorter gab. Whar's Single Eye?"

"Gone ter take a peep et ther Greasers," answered that individual himself. "I reckon we'll gi'n 'em a ride wi' ther corpses inter ther Curmanch' camp. Hit'll be a reg'lar circus, I opine; an' we'll 'low Juan an' Antonio ter lead dead-headed through. I goes in ter fun on ther half-shell."

"We-uns kin jist everlastin'ly scoop in King Kent," asserted Old Rocky. "But, I say, pards, lo's sarch ther or'nary scum o' ther Grandee, an' see ef they hain't gut some o' the pesos King Kent paid 'em."

"I'll do hit, Old Rock; but, by ther bleed o' Crockett, I hates ter put my hands inter ther 'ukes' pockets!" So saying, Single Eye walked to the bushes, from which he soon returned.

"Cuss my cats, ef they warn't kerrect! Fer, I swar, they never gut this much o' 'Nited States gold by 'tendin' stock fer Curnal Landers!"

Thus spoke the old scout, as he laid out a number of twenty-dollar gold-pieces.

"Look-a-here," he continued, "thet talks plain, an' sart'in sure hit come from King Kent. He's es crooked es a grape-vine. Here, take ther stuff, Dick, an' keep hit ter show ther Vigilantes."

"All right, Single Eye! As to those Greasers, I don't care what becomes of them. Put, is it not rather reckless, for us to tempt the fates by

dashing into the Comanche camp? What good can be accomplished by it?"

"Why, don't yer see we kin break 'em up, so ther red bellyuns can't skute down country, an' kill an' scalp men, weemin, an' babies? They're chuck-full o' biliousness, on 'count o' yer gittin' 'way from 'em, an' thar hev'n 'bout a dozen o' ther braves sent ter ther Injun purgatory, wi' ther heads skinned; ther countin' a half-dozen more hyer, what we-uns hes jest tuck in outhen ther heavy night-dow."

"Feelin' thot-a-ways, they'll jist everlastin'ly whoop, an' burn, an' kill, down river, 'mong ther ranches. Thot's what we-uns kin break up, an' hit's gut ter be did!"

"Say no more," said Daring Dick, with a decided voice and air. "That's sufficient reason to influence me as to any movement against them, however reckless and hazardous it may seem."

"We'll prove to them, that a trio of Texans, and one invincible Tonkaway can brave them in their very camp; and if I can get a pop at old Rolling Thunder, I'll make him roll on the grass, in the agonies of death."

"No use ter waste ammernish wi' him," said Single Eye, decidedly. "He's bullet proof, es I kin asserwate; fer I've peeped 'cross sights, an' pulled trigger et ther cuss mor'n onc't when I'd ha' swore I hed him dead; but thar he war, heart, an' sassy, an' hellish, as usual, and a howlin' like a wounded painter."

In this strain, the three men conversed for some time; applying liquor to their wounds, to prevent inflammation. Then they bore the corpses of the Comanches, from the thicket to the timber-cove, and fastened them to the saddles upon the mustangs; from which, when in life, they had sounded their war-cries, that were now hushed forever.

Strong saplings were cut down and trimmed, and sections of these were bound to the backs of the dead; the end to the rearmost upward projections of the Indian saddles, which differed little from the horn of the same.

Lariats secured the ankles beneath the bellies of the animals, and were wound from the top of the sticks, by the necks of the dead, over the shoulders, and then fastened securely to the horns of the saddles.

Not long had the trio to wait before Turtle made his appearance, with that half of the herd of mares, which had been in the charge of Francisco, and on the north side of the neck of the bend.

The herd was thus reunited, and driven out from the timber-cove, into, and down the swell of the bend, for a short distance, without in any way frightening the animals.

Then the four avengers, with the two Mexicans bound upon their horses, both terrified nearly to death, and the mustangs upon which were secured the corpses of the Comanches, all in lead, rode out, and proceeded on their way, toward the Comanche camp—driving the immense herd before them, at a moderate pace.

A surprise, it was evident, was on the bill, for the war-party of Rolling Thunder.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A CLEAN SWEEP.

TURTLE and the old scouts, with Daring Dick and the two Greasers, having the corpses of the Comanches bound to horses in the lead, proceeded on toward the eastern portion of the bend, driving the mares before them, and keeping as much in the shade of the southern line of timber as was possible.

As the mustangs of the Comanches were between them and the camp of the Indians, they hoped to approach quite near without being discovered, judging that the night-guard would be stationed on each side of the mustangs, near the timber, to prevent the animals from straying.

Thus our friends went on, until within a quarter of a mile from the mustangs of the war-party, without any alarm having been given.

The Indians who had been sent up the river to capture the herd had carried their long lances with them, and each of our friends had brought one of these weapons along, with a view of making good use of it in stampeding the mares and urging them on.

But a short distance further did Turtle and the scouts think it prudent to advance. Then the Tonkaway fell back with Single Eye, and the herd was urged out from the shade into the clear moonlight, the four men stationing themselves in a line in the rear of the animals, and some little distance apart.

Not a moment was lost, after this movement was accomplished. Stampede was the word.

The mares in the rear started at once, and their alarm spread to the leaders of the herd. In two minutes all were galloping madly toward the Comanche camp.

Then it was that the neck-ropes of the horses, to which the dead were bound, were dropped by our friends, who prodded these animals with the lances. These mustangs had been troublesome from the first, and when released, and tortured with the lance-thrusts, they snorted with increased fright and pain, and plunged forward among the herd.

The horses, with Antonio and Juan secured to their saddles, were then treated in the same manner and the Greasers, when they raged ahead and recalled the words of their captors—knowing that they were about to be carried against their will into the camp of the Comanches—shrieked with terror. This served to make the stampede a success, but at the same time it alarmed the guards at the Indian encampment.

Dick and Turtle then gave out terrific whoops and yells. The scene was strikingly grand and terrible.

The bright moon shone placidly down, pouring a flood of silvery light upon the wild and savage vista.

On like a gale swept the mad stampede, the horses tossing their heads, as in long bounds they shot forward in a mad mass toward the mustangs of the Comanches, which were now prancing and snoring in terror.

The danger whoops of the guard at once awoke the sleeping braves, who sprung to arms.

There was no time for them to secure and mount their steeds and defend the camp; and on foot as far as fighting went, these "horse Indians" were at a great disadvantage. They were now completely bewildered and demoralized.

The six braves riding in front was what most astonished the war-party.

But as the came nearer, the warriors in the camp detected that they were scalpless, and then the truth burst upon them. Yells of the most vengeful fury were now heard among the Comanches.

No more terrible scene was ever witnessed.

As the fearful stampede, an avalanche of brutes thundered near, the mustangs whirled, and dashed at break-neck speed toward their masters.

The taunting and exultant whoops of the Tonkaway chief served to infuriate the Comanches to frenzy.

There was but one way of escape open.

The stampede would trample them to shapeless masses.

Rolling Thunder raged like a wounded lion, but at length was forced to order his braves to save themselves, by springing into the branches of the adjacent trees.

This was soon done.

Then was accomplished a most skillful maneuver, by the scouts, Dick and Turtle.

At a signal from the latter, all sped headlong to the south of the stampede, and gradually turned the animals, by whoop and yell and prod of lance, in a curve to the northward, just clearing the timber. Had not this been achieved, many of them would have dashed out their brains against the tree-trunks.

As the change in the course of the terrified animals was effected, the scouts hurled the long lances from them, as did the Tonkaway and Daring Dick; and all jerked revolvers, blazing into the thick foliage.

A Comanche dropped here and there, and dread death-cries sounded amid the Texan yells and the war-cry of Turtle. The infuriated savages sent out vengeful whoops, and clouds of arrows; but the latter were turned from their course by the branches and twigs.

Then the revolvers were quickly returned to their scabbards, and Old Rocky and Turtle grasped their lassoes, adjusted the nooses, and causing their steeds to make a "spurt," sent the raw-hide ropes hissing through the air; the nooses dropping over the heads of the two Mexicans. These now shrieked, in the most abject manner, for well they knew the object of their captors.

They had not forgotten the words of the scouts, at the neck of the bend.

The horses of the wretched Greasers were quickly led toward the camp, and there turned loose; the yells of the Tonkaway and Old Rocky causing them to trot to the very trees, from which the Comanches were then leaping.

Then on after the stampede, galloped our four friends, the whoops of the Indians, and the shrieks of Juan and Antonio sounding in their rear.

The stampede had been a brilliant success.

Rolling Thunder and his warriors had not a single mustang left!

A clean sweep had been made, and a war-party of "horse Indians," were horseless—thus rendered almost helpless, far from their village.

The quartette now rode moderately over the wide "open," side by side; while far ahead sped the mob of animals, toward the entrance of the bend, and the far-stretching plain.

"Dang my d'rgs!" yelled Old Rocky; "ef thet warn't jist ther bestest an' liveliest little circus I've seed since I war hatched! Turtle, ye're a boss stompeder—I'll afferdavy on thet."

"Make Comanche feel like heap big fools. Want crawl in coyote holes and hide. Can't walk to village. What do? Want fight. Heap mad."

"Take own scalps. No, have Greasers. Now have torture-dance. Torture Mexicans. It is good. Waugh!"

"Cuss my cats, kittens, an' all ther c'ramourts counted in, ef I'd be in them Greasers' boots fer an o' Texas, an' New Mex' counted in!"

"They'll get scarified, an' baked, an' hashed, 'sides being sculped, 'fore ther red bellyuns shets off thar breathe fer good. But they deserve hit all—condemn 'em!"

"Ef we hedn't turned ther critters jist as we did things wouldn't ha' run so smooth. Dick, how d'yer like rampagin' 'mong reds?"

"It was the most terrible sight I ever witnessed," answered the young man. "I had no idea we would all 'skin' through alive. What will the Comanches do now, without mustangs?"

"They'll hev ter squat right thar," said Old Rocky, with a chuckle, "an' send some o' thar young braves back ter ther village arter fresh nags."

"Mebbe so they'll make a break ter git thar own critters back ag'in. We-uns'll hev some considerable hefty trouble ter git ther herd simmered down into a sorter civilized way o' actin' afore we kin skute Leon-ways with 'em."

"Reckon they'll think we're in ther hullsall hoss biz when they sees us comin' wi' this hull carayard."

At this moment the Tonkaway, who had frequently cast a sharp glance backward toward the Comanche camp, jerked his horse to his haunches, expressing great surprise in his usual ejaculation:

"Waugh!"

The scouts and Dick at once halted, and also looked back, over their trail.

Plainly to be seen, was a horseman, approaching at full speed toward them.

Soon he was sufficiently near, to reveal his identity to those who knew him.

It was Antonio!

In some manner, the Greaser had escaped from the Comanches.

Under the circumstances, his coming was strange.

How he had effected his escape was a mystery. He was still bound fast, having no control over himself; but the horse, to which he was secured, dashed directly toward them.

Soon Antonio reached their side, when he yelled, in a hoarse voice:

"All the saints have rescued me from the red devils! The Comanches could not hold my mustang, and he galloped away. *Madre d' Dios* preserved me; and I feel that Senor Dick will let me go free, for I have something to tell him."

"Out with it, Antonio, and I'll think of it!"

"Senor Dick knows not why King Kent paid Antonio to drive the horses from the Rio Leon."

"I am at a loss to know why, but I am confident that he had some diabolical object in view."

"Senor Dick is right. The horses were driven away, so you should ride after them. Then, when you were gone, King Kent was to steal Senorita Lola. He has done so before now, and should be canned on the Rio San Saba."

"Good heavens! It cannot be—but yes; I believe the Mexican! Come, pards; for Heaven's sake, stick to me now. If that demon harms my Lola, my affianced wife, I'll tear him limb from limb!"

"Turtle say King Kent snake. Snake jump from grass, then bite. Turtle talk straight. Ought shoot King Kent on Brazos. King Kent hurt Lily of Leon. Turtle torture, scalp!"

"Do you really think, Antonio, that King Kent has carried away Miss Landers from the ranch, and has brought her to the San Saba?"

"Antonio knows that was what he intended to do two nights ago, and you were to be drawn away from the ranch, so he would succeed, and you could not follow his trail. He has nearly twenty men—the Basin Bandits—who live at the meeting of the waters of the Leon and Brazos. King Kent is captain of the bandits."

"May the good Lord give me strength to bear this!" exclaimed the young man, in his great misery.

"Antonio, you shall go free; but never let me see your face again!"

Immediately the young Texan cut the Greaser's bonds.

Neither Turtle, Single Eye, nor Old Rocky offered a word of remonstrance.

The minds of all were filled with new thoughts.

The stampede and the Comanches were forgotten.

It was terrible, to think that the angelic Lola Landers was in the power of such a miscreant as King Kent.

At once, the Tonkaway, who seemed almost as excited and concerned as Daring Dick, turned his horse, and shot into the timber; all following, and forcing their steeds beneath the shades, and then through the river. Thus on they went, to search the bottom-timber, clear to the Colorado if necessary.

Daring Dick was dumfounded at the dread intelligence.

His eyes flashed with vengeful fury, and his handsome face became pallid at the fearful possibilities in connection with his darling; if, indeed, she was in the power of King Kent.

On our friends stole through the dark shades, the fair face of Lola Landers revealed plainly in the mirror of imagination, in the minds of each; for they all knew, and loved, and respected the Lily of Leon.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A NEW DEPARTURE.

Our friends had maintained perfect silence since entering the timber, each being busy with his own thoughts in connection with the startling communication of Antonio.

The latter, when told by Daring Dick that he could depart, headed his horse southward, and disappeared in the bottom-timber. His only hope of safety was to make for the settlements, or to join King Kent, whom he believed to be at the confluence of the Colorado and San Saba.

The treacherous Greaser entertained this idea; knowing that, could he join the bandits, and warn them of the presence of the Comanches, and the formidable quartette, he would not only receive a heavy reward, but be safe in every way.

But to return to our friends.

All halted, as if by mutual understanding to that effect, although not a word was spoken.

Turtle then threw himself from his horse, saying:

"Have council talk. It is good. Waugh!"

"Dang and double dang my ole palpertator, ef this hyer ain't a sitiwashe what calls fer considerable calculation! Ye're right. Tonk; a council-talk comes in 'properate 'bout now."

As he spoke Old Rocky dismounted also.

"Wa-al," exclaimed Single Eye, following suit. "Dog'd ef I ain't feelin' purty bilious 'gards ther lee'tle gal. Cuss them Basin Bandits, as Antonio called 'em! They must ha' had a fly hole ter crawl inter, er ther Brazos boyces would ha' found 'em."

"Ef thet ornary King Kent hes stoled ther curmill's purty lee'tle gal, an' lunged out on ther cut, shoot an' rob biz with his gang—why she air in a ormighly bad box, an' hev gut to be reskied speedy, er she's a goner."

The Tonkaway produced his pipe, filled the same, and lighted the tobacco with flint and steel.

After puffing for some moments, he passed the calumet to Old Rocky, who sat next to him.

When the pipe had gone around the little circle, Turtle spoke, but laconically:

"What do? Where go?"

"I opine," said Old Rocky, "thet we'd better glide down, on both sides ther drink; two on each side, 'zaminin' ther timber class. They'd hev ter make speedy runs ter git 'cross the Colorado till yit. 'Bout how fur did yer glide on ther hoss-trail, pard Dick?"

"We didn't crowd our animals, as you see by their condition," was the reply. "But this delay is torture to me. What matters it, if we don't meet the fiends till we cross the Colorado?"

"Easy, pard! Easy," put in Single Eye; "we-uns c'u'dn't spect ter chaw up, an' spit out nigh on ter

twenty outlaws. We hes ter play 'roots' onter 'em, in ther timber an' bush, er lose ther game.

"I opine we'd better hustle, es Ole Rock perposes, two on each side ther drink, an' wait fer 'em. What d'yer think o' hit, Turtle?"

"My white brothers talk good. Council broke. Waugh!"

And the Tonkaway sprung to his feet, and into his saddle, saying:

"Come. Turtle go over river. Single Eye go over river. Find bad white men. Find Lily of Leon. Turtle heap mad. War-cry on lips. Waugh!"

The Tonkaway urged his black steed into the river, and swam the animal across, followed by Single Eye; while Old Rocky and Daring Dick separated, one keeping within a short distance of the stream, the other half-way between his companion and the outer margin of the timber line—both going down the San Saba, and keeping a keen lookout; but depending more upon their ears than their eyes, to discover indications of the presence of the Basin Bandits.

Turtle and Single Eye followed the same course, on the opposite side of the river; all four being nearly in a line, but of course invisible to each other in the shades. Not one of them, however, had the remotest idea that they would discover the band on the south side of the Rio Colorado; but they knew that they would not be satisfied, without a thorough search of the bottom-timber.

They had no means of knowing whether King Kent had succeeded in his dastardly abduction.

If he had, in what manner had it been accomplished?

Had he torn Lola from her home, on the night following the day on which Dick and Turtle had set out from the ranch? In that case, it was just possible that they had crossed the Colorado.

They little dreamed, that the miscreants they sought were near at hand, and had in their power, not only Lola Landers, but Edna Edwards.

And little thought any of the four, that the most startling and tragic surprises awaited them—that the night, so eventful thus far, was pregnant with dreadful events; that they were fated yet to gaze upon still more agonizing scenes.

Even while they had been holding their "council talk," preparations were being made, where they least expected it, for "ringing in" the changes of the terrible scenes in the tragic drama of the night. A most amazing occurrence had taken place, immediately after our four friends had separated, as has been described.

Turtle, whose senses were strained to the utmost, to detect by sight or sound, anything that would point to, or indicate the presence of human beings other than those of his own party, suddenly jerked his horse to a halt; and, turning in his saddle, bent his ear to listen. Then he dismounted, and cast hims if flat upon the earth, his ear upon the leafy carpet.

Instantly he was up, and again in his saddle, giving a low and peculiar signal.

The steed shot forward, and soon was at the side of Skip-Lively; the Tonkaway saying to Single Eye, who had halted:

"Single Eye ride fast to river. Follow Turtle. Comanche come. Heap mad. Want scalp. Waugh!"

Hesitating not a moment, the Tonkaway sped toward the river, Single Eye close following.

"Dog-gone my pictur!" exclaimed the latter, "ef ther ole cus: wi' horns an' huffs ain't runnin' things on this section o' ther big ball o' dirt! Ef ther cussed Comanches ain't comin', jist a-hummin', I'm ther boss pervericator in ther Lone Star State. What in thunderation does hit mean? Cuss my ca's an' kittens, ef things doesn't 'pear ter be sorter mixe.!"

Following his red pard, Single Eye guided Skip-Lively into the waters, down the bank; the animal entering the river noiselessly, and striking out for the opposite bank, as Turtle gained and surmounted it.

The Tonkaway immediately sped on into the shades, and soon returned toward the river, with Old Rocky and Daring Dick in his company.

With a loss of caution, Turtle uttered one word:

"Come."

Slugly the scouts and Dick followed, all finding they were in a mustang-path, that led parallel with the river, the bushes growing quite dense between; over which, however, the riders could easily look. But a short distance did they travel thus. Then the chief halted, pointing significantly over the dark waters.

On the opposite bank, and for some distance inland from the river, was a wide wash-out, or gully. This was utterly devoid of bushes—its banks, some six feet in height, and its bed not more than twenty feet across.

All now fixed their gaze upon this gully, Old Rocky and Daring Dick filled with the greatest wonder and curiosity; they not having the least idea what their pards had discovered, or what would next meet their eyes. Turtle had given no explanation, having merely, by a gesture, made known his desire that they should follow him.

Not long had they halted, when their attention was attracted some little distance up the river.

Plainly heard now, were the sounds which, afar off, had attracted the attention of the keen-eared chief, and had probably thus prevented his capture, as well as that of Single Eye.

That which now drew the wondering attention of Old Rocky and Daring Dick—but which was looked for, and the nature of the same known by the others—was the whisking of the branches, and the swaying of the tops of the undergrowth, for some distance in breadth, and but a little removed from the river-bank.

This increased, nearing the gully rapidly.

In a short time, down into the gully, across the bed of the same, and then up the opposite bank in terrific bounds, sprang warrior after warrior; bows and arrows in their hands, feathers flaunting, and long, black hair flying.

Scalp-decorated, and with tiny silver ornaments glinting in their hair, these Comanche braves, naked from the belt upward, and daubed with pigments—no more horrible sight could be witnessed on earth, than that which was presented to our friends in the wash-out, over the dark water.

Demons from G-henna, loose for the night, to curse the earth, and spread death and desolation

broadcast, they appeared to be; and, indeed, they were.

All seemed to be frantically furious, eager for blood and revenge—their chief, Rolling Thunder, being in the lead.

The on-speeding of the Comanche war party—our friends knew that all had passed over the gully that had been left, nearly two-score in number—down the Rio San Saba, was a most bewildering sight to the four spectators; indeed, their object was unaccountable to them.

But they were not to remain long in ignorance.

"Waugh!" burst from the lips of Turtle, as the last Comanche sprung up the bank of the gully.

"Dang my doraz!" ejaculated Old Rocky.

"Cuss my cats?" came from Single Eye.

"In Heaven's name, what does this movement of the red fiends mean?" demanded Daring Dick.

CHAPTER XXV.

ON THE TRAIL OF THE BANDITS.

INSANELY furious was Rolling Thunder, and no less so were his braves, as they sprung from the trees after the danger was past and saw their mustangs mingled with the herd of mares, and galloping in a wild stampede away up the "open" of the bend, toward the western prairies.

No greater calamity could have befallen them; indeed Rolling Thunder would not have felt as bad had half of his war-party been laid out, mangled and dead, in the camp. Only three of his warriors had been slain by the random firing of the stampede; but many had received wounds, which made them all the more eager for revenge.

The hat of Tonkaway they saw had been the prime mover and director in the entire affair, and they would have yelled with insane delight could they have had him at the torture-stake.

Terrible, indeed, would have been the fate of the Tonkaway chief, could the Comanches have captured him, at that, or any other time.

It was while the braves were filling the night-air with their whoops and yells that they observed the lassoing of the horses of the Greasers, and the starting of them toward their camp.

In the excitement and fury that had ruled them, the Comanches had paid little attention to any except the four stampedeers, they having recognized the terrible scouts, Old Rocky and Single Eye, who had slain so many of their number on previous occasions, and the fact that the two Mexicans were captives to the whites and the Tonkaway had not been detected.

Now, however, as the two Greasers were coming near, the Indians perceived that they were both bound fast to their horses, and were being borne into the camp much against their will.

Instantly the Comanches comprehended the situation.

The Greasers, it was evident, had stolen the herd, and the trail had been followed by the scouts and Turtle.

Yells of triumph burst from the lips of the braves, many of whom rushed to secure the animals of the Mexicans; but the horse of Antonio, startled by the rush and yells, whirled, and galloped wildly after the scouts—reaching them, as we have seen.

Juan fared worse, for the terrified and shrieking wretch was secured and dragged from his saddle, the horse being lariatd fast to a tree, for the use of a brave who was ordered to start as soon as he could prepare food, to spy after the stampeding mustangs.

T was warrior was ordered never to show his face to his chief, unless he returned with the animals; or, at least, sufficient of them to mount the survivors of the war-party.

As may be supposed, this brave felt that he was an exile from his tribe, from the start; for he had not the least hope of securing the stampeding mustangs.

Neither did he much expect that he could escape the terrible Tonkaway and the scouts.

However, he set out, prudently keeping within the bottom timber, but on the border of the same; and, to his intense relief and joy, he perceived the meeting of the Mexican and the scouts the abandoning of the stampeding animals by the latter, and their departure into the shades—evidently down by the Rio San Saba.

This gave the Comanche spy the most intense satisfaction; for, could he but succeed in turning the stampede, and driving the herd back to the camp, he knew that two eagle-feathers would flaunt from his fillet in place of one.

Antonio entered the timber, in his flight, far ahead of this warrior; and the latter refrained from seeking to kill or capture him, as so much depended upon him at that critical time.

On, in quest of the stampede, went the exultant and hopeful Comanche.

Meantime Juan was dragged into the camp, amid the fiercest yells; and doubtless the Indians would have tortured him then and there, but for unlooked for and exceeding good news.

Rolling Thunder stood, with folded arms, a perfect personification of brutality and ferocity, gazi g at the Greaser, as the latter was dragged into the camp; but, at that very moment, a young brave—one who had been dispatched, as a spy, toward the Rio Colorado—galloped up at great speed, his horse dripping with water, he having forded the river below the cliffs.

Directly up to the front of Rolling Thunder, he galloped, jer ing his horse to haunches, and at the same time leaping to the earth, and standing—straight as a mount-sheltered pine—before his chief. His arms were folded, and the jaw-strap of his mustang still clutched; while the animal panted laboriously, proving that it had galloped long and fast since leaving the war-party.

The young brave stood silent, waiting to be addressed by his chief; and immediately the latter spoke:

"Red Snake has come. His mustang has run fast. Do buzzards fly over camp of Texans on Colorado? Do coyotes hide in bush to gnaw bones that white dogs leave at camp-fire? Mebbe so deer feed, antelope feed on San Saba, on Colorado, unscared by white dogs that live in log-lodges. Speak, Red Snake! Rolling Thunder's ears are open."

"Buzzards fly thick in air. Coyotes hide in bush. The smell of burnt meat fills air of San Saba"—pointing down the river, in the direction of the Col-

orado—"deer run fast over pairie. Turkeys fly high in the tree-tops, for the white dogs of Brazos build camp-fire on San Saba."

"How many?" asked the Comanche chief, thinking perhaps that the young brave had seen the scouts and the Tonkaway.

Opening his fingers, and holding his hands upward, and then closing, and extending his fingers again, the young warrior designated eighteen.

Then a far-reaching and prolonged whoop of exultation and joy burst from Rolling Thunder.

This drew the Comanches in a circle around the pair, the young brave being the envy of many; although they only knew that he had brought good news from the trail.

"Where camp?" demanded the chief.

Again Red Snake, by movements of his fingers, represented the number thirty, as he said:

"So many arrow-flights."

Instantly Rolling Thunder drew an eagle-feather from his quiver, at the sight of which a murmur of approbation went the rounds of the warriors.

The young brave bent upon one knee, bowing his head.

His chief inserted the badge, or token of prowess, bravery, skill, and honor—the insignia of a warrior—in the fillet of the young Comanche, who had won rank and distinction on his first war-path.

"Red Snake is a warrior," asserted the chief, gazing around upon his followers. "He has found camp of white dogs. White dogs got mustangs. Comanches want mustangs, want scalps."

"War-path open. War-cry soon sound. Our belts will be heavy with scalps of white dogs. Get guns, get mustangs from diablo Ter-nos."

"Get captives for torture. Quick, war-path open. Tie Greaser dog up high in tree. Bime-by come torture. Rolling Thunder, your chief has spoken."

Then, waving his arm, he dispersed his warriors, to prepare for an advance down the San Saba.

Red Snake procured food, and after gorging himself—at times bowing his head quickly, to plant the eagle-feather forward before his eyes, to assure himself that he was not, or had not been dreaming—he then made ready to guide the war-party on toward revenge and blood, scalps, horses, and captives. The breast of the young warrior swelled with pride and exultation.

Juan was hauled up into the topmost branches of a huge tree, with a lariat that was secured under his arms; and there bound fast. The luckless Mexican was more like a corpse than a living, breathing human being.

Then the horse of Red Snake, and all the tricks and traps of the camp—tog ther with the lances, which could not well be carried through the timber and undergrowth, and would be of little use on foot—all these were secreted in a dense thicket, at some distance from the camp.

This being completed, the Comanche war party, led by Red Snake, with Rolling Thunder by his side, stole over the river, on a natural bridge formed by a fallen tree, and down the stream; gliding through the undergrowth, with weapons tightly clutched, and an insane thirst for blood, and revenge for the loss of their mustangs and captive, and the lives of so many of their fellow braves, ruling their savage breasts and brains.

And, while thus stealing, with demoniac intent and murderous hate, beneath the shades, they were discovered by our four friends, who were both amazed and perplexed by the unexpected advance of the red fiends, down the Rio San Saba.

Had they even suspected, at the time, the nature of the knowledge the Comanches had become possessed of, and which had led to their departure on foot toward the Colorado—our friends would have torn through the undergrowth, on the side of the river where they had joined each other, and thus gotten ahead of the Indians, with the intention of making a desperate dash into the most deadly danger, to save, if it were possible, innocence and purity from savage cruelty—ay, more than this—from a fate far worse than the most torturing death by any mere physical suffering.

For the Comanches were, as the reader has of course decided, on their way to the camp of the Basin Bandits, under King Kent, whom Red Snake had discovered, and without revealing himself, had followed until the outlaws had encamped. Then the young brave had galloped instantly to inform his chief of the discovery.

The revolver-shots, and yells of the scouts and Indians, had not been heard by the bandits, for the reason that they were then crashing through the undergrowth, in search of a favorable place to encamp.

Had this not been the case—although quite a mile, in a bee-line, from the big bend—they could not have failed to hear these proofs of battle, for the still, rare night air conducted sounds quite a distance, besides echoing afar down the arched riverway, and amid the timber and caverns of the cliffs.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE BANDITS AT THE BEND.

WHEN the Basin Bandits reached the point at which their leader had agreed to encamp, King Kent seemed to be but little if any fatigued. When they halted, however, he paced back and forth, seeming to be in the most excruciating torture of mind, except when upon the move.

His followers knew that his excessive indulgence in ardent spirits would end in mania, and they scarcely doubted that he would kill himself, or others—possibly both.

He could get no natural sleep, but lay in a semi-comatose state, his eyes wide open, and staring vacantly, unable to move a muscle until shaken by Big Bill, who kept close watch over him. Then he would start up, and procure more whisky, and would drink until relieved temporarily in body and brain, when he would seek the spot where the two fair captives reclined, and there stand regarding them with an expression that caused them to cling to each other, shuddering with horror and repulsion.

This would madden him, and he would retaliate by expatiating upon the happiness which would be theirs, when they should arrive at the Rio Grande, and he and Lola be wedded.

This mood was even more terrifying to the poor maidens than were his fits of rage and fury. Indeed,

their condition was then a most sad and deplorable one.

Their clothing hung in tatters, having been torn by the thorny bushes, and they were both very pale and dejected in appearance.

Almost constantly galloping, with little rest and less sleep—and this sleep, more of a stupor, accompanied by cold sweats and dread visions—had left them but the shadows of themselves.

The spirit of defiance and indignation, manifested on the first portion of the journey, had vanished. The poor girls were now equally hopeless, and despairing of rescue. The distance they had traveled from the Leon seemed four times as great as it really was, through the sufferings of mind and body they had experienced.

The position chosen for the camp, by the outlaws, was at a point where the bank was perpendicular; it being some ten feet from the surface of the river, and where they could easily procure water, for cooking and drinking.

The trees had no limbs for at least fifteen feet from the ground. It was, therefore, a most favorable place to encamp.

A long halt had been made, during the hottest portion of the previous day; and this enabled the bandits to travel far into the night, when it was cool. Yet rest was pleasant, when it came.

Fires were soon blazing, there being dry wood in abundance, and immediately cooking was in progress. The poor captives were permitted to recline upon a number of outspread blankets.

King Kent regaled himself with whisky, and paced the leafy carpet; at times peering around at Edna and Lola.

The parricide had been drinking to excess for such a length of time, that he was now past eating food; indeed, the scent of the frying bacon made him sick. Wilder and more glaring had his blood-shot eyes become, and he was nervous and restless, starting at the slightest noise in his vicinity.

In truth, he was on the borders of *delirium tremens*.

The bandits all knew this, and they kept close watch upon him; especially Big Bill, who was acting chief, by the request of the majority, for they did not consider King Kent in a fit condition to rely upon in an emergency.

They believed that the rancheeros were on their trail, but they were confident they had traveled so far, and had had such sufficient start in advance, that they were safe until the following day. Then they could select a position easy of defense, and defy any force that might threaten them.

In the midst of King Kent's pacing back and forth, he suddenly halted; and a wild, unnatural laugh burst from his lips, as he used the blood of Lola and Edna to chill with horror, and the bandits to cease eating, and stare at their chief.

The maidens were striving to eat, although they had but little appetite.

King Kent seemed to have been suddenly struck with an agreeable idea, though his laugh was far from agreeable to hear.

He picked up a canteen of whisky, and drank copiously. Then he strode to where Big Bill sat upon the ground, with Crooked Carl and others, eating.

"Bill," said the bandit chief, "how far is it to the big bend, where Antonio was to camp with the mares, and wait for us?"

"It's 'bout a mile 'bove byer, Cap. We-uns 'll strike him in the morning."

"I reckon you've forgot something, Bill."

"What air yer mind runnin' on now, Cap?"

"Why, you know well that Daring Dick followed the trail of the Greasers and the mares. He's had time before this to overtake Antonio. That infernal Tonkaway was with him, and perhaps they have shot the Greasers, turned the herd back and gone toward the Colorado, on the other side of this river and the timber. We couldn't see them, if they have."

"Now, by Hades! this won't do. I'll have that Dick's heart's blood! I've sworn it, and I don't want to be turned back to the Colorado to kill the upstart. I reckon I'd better jump my nag, and ride up-river to investigate."

"An' I reckon yer'd better not Cap. This air a ornigh y dangerous section o' ther country now, I tell yer; an' that's no tellin' what sorter danger yer mought slobber in ter."

"Wait until morning, Cap. Don't yer know that of Daring Dick an' ther Tonk away wiped out ther Greasers, they'll be ter lincin' couple o' days, an' count o' ther mares bein' broke up arter tha' long run?"

"Darned if you ain't right, Bill! We've got dead-wood on that cussed Dick and his red pard, haven't we?"

"Yer kin jist bet, Cap. Wa-al, I should cackle, an' crow, too!"

"Hang me, if I don't torture them both, before the very eyes of the girls!"

"Come an' eat something, Cap. It'll do yer a heap o' good. Ye're gittin' shaky 'bout ther brain-box an' blue 'roun' ther gills. Ef yer doesn't eat, yer'll go plum lunfied."

"Thanks, Bill, but I couldn't eat a bite. It would choke me. I'll drink though, as long as there's any whisky."

"Ef ther whisky gives out, yer'll go under, sure an' sart'in, Cap."

"We'll get plenty on the Rio Grande. I'm going to rush things and buy out some old Castilian, and live in a *casita*, with a host of *posas*. We must push hard for Mexico."

"We've pushed too hard now, Cap. fer ther good o' ther critters."

But King Kent did not hear Big Bill's last assertion, for he had turned around, and gone toward the inclosure where Edna and Lola lay.

Re-moving his sombrero, and towing with mock politeness the bandit captain spoke:

"Ladies, I salute you, and trust you ere as comfortable as can be expected under the circumstances. I am pleased to state that we have neared the point where Antonio, Juan, and Francisco were to await our arrival."

"Daring Dick went on their trail, and he has, doubtless, by this time, not only discovered them, but probably has shot all three of them, and gotten possession of the horses."

"The Tonkaway is with him, and I reckon they'll make the world hum, if they're allowed to gather in the mares, and get back to the Leon. But the Leon

they'll never see again, and no more will you, Lola Landers!"

"But you shall see Daring Dick die. He shall die a lingering death before your eyes. I'll punish him for daring to love one that I had taken a fancy to. Yes, he dies—and by my hand! I have sworn it."

"I'm a desperate devil, Lola Landers. I shot my own father, after having robbed him of his gold. Expect no mercy from me. You are mine, and you cannot escape me!"

"Do you hear me, Lola? It's my turn now. I pleaded for your hand in marriage. Now you shall, on your bend'd knees in the dust, beg and plead to be made a wife—the wife of a parricide. Ha! ha!"

"Excuse me, ladies; I must get a drink."

The poor girls were silent in their agony.

Their mental torture was terrible.

They could only cling to each other, in desperation and dread.

They feared the return of the dastard, and Edna caught up a knife, she had in some way obtained; determined to plunge the blade in King Kent's heart, did he again approach them.

Meanwhile, the miscreant, having procured a pipe, lit it, and sauntered to the upper side of the camp, and into the thickets.

Reaching a log, he sat down on the ground beside it, and smoked; at times removing the pipe, and grinding his teeth.

Thus he sat for some time, when he suddenly whirled, and peeped above the dead log.

Then a sight met his view that curdled his blood, and chilled the very marrow in his bones. But he fought back the fright and horror, having sufficient sense remaining to recall the fact that, of late, he had beheld all manner of fearful shapes and unearthly sights, which he knew were born of strong drink.

That which he now beheld, he believed, upon a moment's reflection, to be also a picture of his disordered imagination; and he grated his teeth, and swore that he would brave it—that he would advance toward it, until it vanished.

What did he see?

A horrible sight, indeed!

It was neither more nor less than a score of hideously-painted and feather-bedizened Comanches, all upon hands and knees and with bows and arrows clutched, and snake-like eyes glittering from out the bars of vermilion and ghastly-white gypsum.

These hideous heads were projecting from many thickets, and from out the green foliage or vines, their whole bodies being visible in some instances, and a few with bars of silvery moonlight shining down upon them and giving to them a still more fiendish appearance.

All had stopped in their slow, onward creeping, as the head of King Kent projected over the log, his twitching facial nerves, his bloodshot and glaring eyes, tangled hair and corpse-like skin, together with his clinched teeth, from which the lips curled back—this strange sight, indeed, tending to awaken and bring to the front all their superstitious fears, causing the entire party to halt staring wildly.

And then, to the dread horror and dumfounded amazement of the Comanches, over the log came the terrible head, arms, body, legs—and then, down upon the earth, on the side toward them!

Slowly, and with eyes fixed and bulging, on toward them came that dread thing in human shape.

The superstitious savages were chained to their positions, paralyzed; when suddenly, panther-like, King Kent sprung upon the nearest brave, expecting that his hand would meet but empty air.

But when he struck a warm, quivering, solid body, which sprung upward, the lightning was scarce quicker than were the movements of the parricide.

With the most piercing shrieks of terror he bounded back over the log, tearing through the thickets and into the camp.

There he fell to the earth, writhing and struggling, tearing up the dead leaves with his fingers, gnashing his teeth and foaming at the mouth, his eyes glaring like those of a wounded panther at bay.

But not a sound had left the lips of the Comanches to betray their presence.

Indeed, their tongues had been powerless and their muscles rigid with the extreme of superstitious terror.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A CHANGE OF CAPTORS.

THE bandits, as the unearthly shriek of their leader sounded with terrific distinctness, echoing in a most startling manner through natural arch and dome, and sounding up and down the limb-canopied river, sprung to their feet in the utmost amazement, not unmixed with apprehension, although they had looked for some violent outbreak from their chief.

They at once rushed to the sufferer, and Big Bill called loudly for a lariat. The rawhide rope was at once produced, and the giant bandit immediately secured one end about the body of King Kent, under his arms, crying out:

"Pick him up, boyces, an' heave him over ther bank inter ther drink! It's ther only way ter fetch him 'roun' ter biz."

This order was quickly obeyed.

The struggling, howling parricide was hurled afar out from the bank into the dark rolling waters.

The two captive maidens had sprung to their feet in horror, as the shrieks of their brutal persecutor reached them; and they now stood, locked in each other's arms, leaning for support against a tree, and trembling violently, while their eyes were fixed upon the dastard who had so wronged them; as he darted from the undergrowth in fright and horror.

The arms of King Kent were extended forward, as he bounded on as if all the furies were after him; his hat being gone, his long unkempt hair flying in the wind created by his speed, and his repulsive face being almost corpse-like.

As he was rushing thus directly toward them, they still retaining in their minds his recent most insulting and threatening words, their alarm was great indeed; and, at once the power of articulation was restored to them. Loud cries came from each, Edna clutching the knife she had secured, and nervously herself to plunge the weapon into his breast.

But King Kent fell in a fit before he could reach

the inclosure of saddles, within which his captives stood; and the maidens gazed in horror at his contortions—soon being relieved, however, for they believed the miscreant was in the death-struggle.

A horrible fascination held the gaze of Edna and Lola, weak and trembling as they were; and both watched each movement of the outlaws as they threw King Kent into the waters of the Rio San Saba.

But no sooner had this curse of their young lives disappeared over the bank than the spell was broken; and the gaze of the maiden was withdrawn from the river-bank, only to encounter a more dread and horrible spectacle.

This was nothing else than, as it seemed to them, hundreds of hideous, paint-daubed faces, crowned with hair and flaunting feathers; with pigment-smear'd breasts, bows and arrows, and black glittering eyes, mad with revenge and bloodthirsty in expression!

This came crawling from the thickets from which King Kent had sprung in his terror.

As the horror-stricken maidens gazed they saw the red fiends rise stealthily to their feet—saw arrows quickly fitted to bow-strings—and then Edna, quivering and shrieking, grasped Lola in her arms and forced her down beneath the wall of saddles and provisions. There both the girls lay deathly sick and weak as infants, in fearful apprehension of what was to follow.

All this was in a moment's time, while yet Big Bill and many of the outlaws stood on the bank, and watched for the reappearance of King Kent above the surface.

Just then, one of the guards rushed from the "open" where the horses were staked, and belied the Comanches, who were gazing toward the group on the river-bank, with bows half bent, and they drawing breath for their terrible war-whoop; their superstitious fears having been dissipated, by watching the contortions of King Kent, and the prompt actions of the outlaws.

Instantly the bandit guard gave utterance to a wild yell of warning, jerked his revolver, and opened fire.

At the same instant, the bandits on the bank whirled about, and the dread, blood-curdling war-whoop of the Comanches, from every savage throat, rung and echoed through the timber of the San Saba.

A flight of arrows hurtled and glinted in the fire-light, through the outlaw camp. The rattling discharge of revolvers immediately followed; Big Bill dropping the rope, to which King Kent was secured.

Then followed a most terrible scene—one that was, indeed, horrible, while yell, and whoop, and death-howl sounded, amid clash of steel, and the rapid tramping of booted and moccasined feet, in desperate struggle for life and death.

Bright blades slashed through flesh and bone and blood spurted through the air, and over the leaves; all this, accompanied by the splashing of waters, as the terror-stricken bandits sprung into the river, to escape the certain death they saw before them. Completely appalled were they, by the hideous Indians, who were furiously maddened by their losses of men and mustangs.

The desperate fight was of short duration.

Then the victory whoop of the Comanches rung loud and exultant—not a bandit being within view, except the dead and dying, who lay with the dead and dying red-men; monotonous and guttural chants sounding weirdly about the scene of death!

Proudly and exultantly, Rolling Thunder stood, with blood-dripping knife and reeking scalp in his hands—the conquering red king of that savage scene—the whoop of victory sounding hoarse and deep as the roar of a buffalo-lull, loud through the shades of the Rio San Saba.

Ten bandits lay, stark, gore-smear'd and gashed in a terrible manner. All were scalpless, and many with feathered shafts projecting from their bodies; their sightless eyes and horribly contorted faces, stamped with terror and agony.

And fifteen Comanches lay also, here and there, slain with bullet and knife or wounded and dying; the latter having been reclined upon the bodies of the dead, to chant their death-songs, as the bright and verdant valley lay beyond the moon, where the grass is ever green the rivers always flow, game abounds in plenty, and the mustangs are as fleet as the wind—all this, revealed to their view; and, to reach which, they must traverse the "long dark trail," with their heads scalped.

And, through all this, Edna and Lola lay trembling in horror, and a dread that was deathly; their breath coming and going in gasps—they still unseen by the Indians.

But they dared not rise, and attempt to escape; fearing discovery and death, the moment their heads appeared above the wall of saddles.

Rolling Thunder and his braves did not lose sight of the fact that they were without horses. Indeed this was uppermost in their minds, and heaved their arms for most desperate fight; and at once the chief ordered a dozen of his braves to scatter through the timber, in search of the bandits.

A signal yell, preceded by a cry of agony, proved that they had not only discovered the horses but had slain the remaining guard, who had doubtless been asleep. The warriors who remained in the camp, tore the arms and clothing from the slain bandits; hacking the serceners' clay with savage ferocity, and then lurked the mutilated corpses into the river.

Their own dead were placed, side by side, at the south of the camp, and their wounded laid upon the blankets of the bandits; their heads and shoulders supported by saddles, which were taken from the little wall'd inclosure, within which were the terrified Lola and Edna.

It was when the braves went for these saddles, that the captive maidens were discovered. Red Snake having reported that they were with the party of whites. But, as they had not been seen, they were supposed to have been slain; as they were known to be captives, through the spies having watched the bandits, since the latter reached the Colorado.

An exultant yell called the attention of Rolling Thunder, and he strode to the inclosure, uttering a "Ugh" of surprise and joy, as he beheld the white squaws.

Both maidens tottered to their feet, and leaned

against the tree-trunk; again paralyzed with the horror and danger that encompassed them.

Hopeless and despairing, indeed, were the unfortunate and much-wounded girls, as the painted and blood stained demons glared gloatingly upon them.

Their situation and condition had been terrible previously, but now it was doubly so; indeed, they dared not think of the probable fate before them, lest their tortured brains would burst.

The Comanche chief stepped over the wall of saddles saying:

"Heap good squaws. Sweep lodge. Cook buffalo-meat for Rolling Thunder. Ugh! Got heap good scalp for shield. Shine like sun."

The monster extended his blood-stained hand, to clutch the golden hair of Lola Landers, which hung in tangled and wild abandon below her waist—a wealth of wavy tresses.

The maidens gave a wild and piercing shriek, and sunk senseless at the feet of Rolling Thunder.

The braves had stood in wonder, not devoid of awe, gazing at the fair captives, whose beauty of form and face—and especially Lola's golden hair—seemed unearthly to them. They entertained the idea that she must be a favored daughter of the Good Spirit, who had come to visit the earth from the blazing sun.

The chief, himself, who had never before beheld such glorious hair, was struck with thoughts kin to those of his warriors; but he scorned to betray his feelings in any way.

A gesture, given impatiently by Rolling Thunder, caused the braves to continue on in their work: conveying the saddles and blankets for the comfort of the wounded. As the camp was thus cleared, the horses and mules of the outlaw band were led into the camp, for the inspection of the chief, who, with much pleasure, viewed the animals, and then ordered them all to be returned to the "open," except six, which were saddled, and with as many braves, dispatched to the old camp at the big bend, to bring the lances and equipments.

These were ordered, also, to bring the Mexican captive to the bandit camp; at which the Comanche chief decided to remain—a mule being taken in lead, upon which to bind Juan.

This party having departed, Rolling Thunder ordered a half dozen of his best trailers to scour the bottom-timber, and capture or kill the escaped outlaws.

The red scouts departed on this mission at once.

When these had gone, Black Deer, who had been sent on the trail of the stampede, galloped into camp; his horse covered with foam, and panting laboriously.

Springing to the earth, this warrior stood before his chief, silent and stoical; manifesting not the slightest surprise or emotion of any kind, at beholding his slain comrades, or at finding the chief in possession of the camp of the hated Texans.

"Black Deer has come,"—thus spoke Rolling Thunder. "Has he driven the mustangs back, that he shows his face to his chief, or has he come to die by knife?"

"Black Deer has driven mustangs back. Heap horses in old camp."

"It is good. Black Deer is a brave warrior. He shall wear his two eagle-feathers in fillet."

As had Red Snake, so did Black Deer kneel; and the chief thrust an eagle-feather beside the one that already flaunted from the warrior's fillet.

Then he asked:

"Where white scouts? Where Tonkaway chief?"

"Ride in woods. Down San Saba."

"Ugh!" grunted Rolling Thunder, instantly sweeping keen glances over the stream, and seeming to pierce the foliage.

"Black Deer ride over San Saba. Find trail of Turtle. Find trail of white scouts."

Thus commanded the Comanche chief.

Without a word, the warrior started away, leading his horse.

"Grass over there," directed the chief. "Mustang no good in bushes."

Black Deer soon found the "open," by the sounds that proceeded from the horses there feeding; and, staking his steed, and removing saddle and jaw-strap, he threw the same into a thicket, and swam over—vanishing in the bushes on the west bank.

"Ugh!" came from Rolling Thunder's lips, in relief and exultation, as he stalked back and forth over the leafy carpet in the camp of his vanquished white foe; his form proudly poised, his arms folded across his breast, and his feathers flaunting.

And most certainly the chief had good ground for joy and triumph.

The reverses of the early part of the night had been greatly overbalanced by the successes of the latter part.

He had gained ten scalps, two fair captives, the camp of his enemies, and a great number of horses, besides equipments and provisions.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

APPEARANCE OF THE PARRICIDE.

TURTLE, Daring Dick and the two old scouts sat their horses in amazement as the Comanches sprang into the gully and thence down the river.

They had not the remotest idea what the object of the red-men could be.

"In the name of wonder, what does it mean?"

Thus cried out Dick, in astonishment.

"Dang my dorgs ef I knows!" answered Old Rocky.

"I opines," broke out Single Eye, "thet thar's somethin' up, down-river, what we-uns doesn't know nothin' 'bout, but we orter know mighty speedy."

"By Heavens, pards!" exclaimed Dick, in great excitement, "can it be possible that King Kent and his band have arrived in this vicinity, and that the Comanches, through one of their spies, have found it out?"

"I doesn't know," said Old Rocky meditatively. "Does yer believe what the Greaser said, Dick? Hit doesn't 'pear es though King Kent 'ud dar' do sich a dirty mean trick, knowin' he'd git strung up a limb ef we-uns er the rancheeros corraled him."

"But he doesn't know that you and Single Eye are here," explained the young man; "and, if he did, he has men enough with him to defy us."

"Dick orter know all 'bout King Kent," asserted

Single Eye, "an' what ther no-count crooked bush-crawler 'ud be lieble ter do."

"Talk no good on war-path," put in the Tonkaway. "King Kent he steal Lily of Leon. Heap scare rancheeros catch him. Ride fast. Heap scare lasso on neck. Mebbe so King Kent on San Saba. Daring Dick he talk good. Come! Turtle want more scalp. War-cry on lips. Waugh!"

On our four friends continued slowly, in order to avoid discovery, as, if they made haste, they would be heard, although the ground was soft beneath the timber. They soon found, however, that their animals were making better time than the Comanches.

Soon they reached a point which was directly opposite the camp-fires. Here they dismounted and, securing their horses, stole through the undergrowth toward the river, all keeping close together.

Before arriving at a favorable position our friends were decided in their minds in regard to the identity and character of the campers, for the voice of King Kent broke on their ears, as he was addressing Lola and Edna.

Dick was perfectly wild at hearing this.

"Look, pards!" he exclaimed, "the Greaser told the truth—the infernal truth!"

As the half-crazed young man was on the point of bounding madly to the rescue the scouts both sprang upon him and hurled him to the earth, Turtle assisting them to hold him down.

"Dick, ole pard," said Old Rocky, "listen ter reason. Don't be a fool! You'll ruinate ther hull biz."

"Thar'll be no show ter git ther leetle gal outen ther scrape," said Single Eye, "cep'tin' by layin' low an' watchin' fer chances. Cuss my cats! Ef yer doesn't keep cool we'll all lose our ha'r, an' Miss Lola'll not have ther leastest show to skin through. Doesn't yer see, b-sides, thet ther reds are goin' ter salerwate ther Basin Pandits?"

Daring Dick finally listened to these reasonings, and promised faithfully to do as they said.

Upon gaining this promise, his pards released him; and then all bent their ears, and strained their sight to lose nothing that happened beyond the river.

"Hit beats anythin' I ever see'd," declared Old Rocky. "Dang ef I ain't nigh on ter bein' lunified myself! King Kent air ther devil's right bower-dog'd ef he ain't!"

For some time they remained silent, hearing and understanding the bandit chief.

"By ther holy Moses, he's bin an' shooted his own dad! Wa-al, I do swar, I hopes ther reds 'll tortur' him! But what other gal air thet? Dang me ef 'tain't ole Edwards's darter!"

"Hit's her, su'es shootin'!" agreed Single Eye.

All felt somewhat relieved, when King Kent, pipe in mouth, sauntered into the undergrowth.

"Comanche get King Kent now," said the Tonkaway. "Heap good. Waugh!"

But great was the astonishment of our friends, when, with terrific shrieks, the bandit leader rushed from the undergrowth, and fell in a fit. Soon after, they saw him thrown into the river.

The terrible fight between the outlaws and the Comanches was witnessed by them; Turtle being frantic, because he could not take part in it.

Both parties were their deadly enemies, and the more there were killed on both sides, the better for our friends, and for the captives. But, when Rolling Thunder stalked about in the camp, they were astounded.

Had the bandits held together, and not have become demoralized by fright, they would have defeated the Comanche war-party.

Many on both sides lay dead; while the survivors of the outlaws, who had encamped, were now wandering in the woods, and would, without doubt, be hunted down, and to death, by the Indians.

Once again Lola and Edna disappeared from view, as Rolling Thunder stepped into the inclosure, and caught at the golden hair of the former. The scouts were again forced to restrain Daring Dick from dashing forward, and attempting a rescue.

Then it was that the crouching quartette beheld a terrible sight; their attention being attracted by a slight splashing in the water below them, and a rustling among the reeds.

The next moment King Kent, all dripping with water, crawled up the bank and threw himself upon the ground not far from them; the lariat still secured around his body, and extending into the water.

His appearance was truly horrible!

His long black hair clung to his head, neck, and shoulders, his face was ghastly, and his black eyes fixed and staring. Evidently, he was conscious of his present position, only to the extent of struggling to save his miserable life.

The light of the camp fires over the river revealed his form sufficiently for our friends to see him in all his miserable and forlorn condition of body, and his tortured state of mind was shown and plainly mirrored in his glaring eyes, and stamped upon his contorted face. His teeth were tightly set, gleaming white, his lips curled upward and downward from the same, and tightly drawn and twitching spasmodically. Such was the sight presented by the parricide.

It was only for a moment.

Then the wretch was jerked rapidly into the river again, tearing wildly as he went at the grass and bushes and reeds that grew at the foot of the bank.

Our friends then perceived a paint daubed face, above which flaunted two eagle feathers. Then the parricide and the Comanche brave, clutching each other, their heads over each other's shoulders and writhing in the waters, floated down with the current, the high bank on the opposite side preventing them from being seen from the camp.

The warrior was Black Deer, and he was "playing" for another eagle-feather.

And although but dimly seen as they were carried for some distance below the camp, the watchers beheld another head with a white face shoot out from the reeds on the same side of the river upon which they were toward the struggling pair. Then a plumed head came from the opposite side.

As these met near King Kent and his antagonist, there was a thrashing of arms, white spray flew upward, and a bar of moonlight, that shone down upon the waters through the limbs of the arched river-

way, revealed fast-flying and and glittering steel, and a rapid play of glinting blades amid the same, over the plumed heads, the ghastly white and the painted faces.

For a moment only. Then into the darkness and around a curve floated the desperately-fighting four.

"Wa-al, I hopes ter be hashed by a priz' b'r, ef this hyer ain't a boss circus!" whispered Old Rocky.

"Great Crockett! Hit beats ther dickers," agreed Single Eye; "but we-uns orter corraled ther cuss."

"Hit wouldn't ha' did, pard," said Old Rocky.

"He'd spit big music soon as he know'd who'd gut him."

"By Heavens!" exclaimed Daring Dick: "I would have risked it any way if I hadn't been nearly paralyzed with astonishment."

"Never mind, pard Dick," replied Old Rocky; "he's on the programme fer tortur' an' I wouldn't be in his bates, even ef he wr safe from ther reds, fer his hyer hull big ball o' dirt."

"Why did the Comanche not take him over the stream into the camp?" asked Dick.

"Want Rolling Thunder think captive 'way off," explained Turtle. "Want chief think I've hard time get King Kent. Then get eagle-feather in fillet."

"Ya-as, thet's ther hull biz," agreed Single Eye; "an' hit war one o' his gang what swum out ter resky King Kent, but I reckon he'll go under too, without ha'r."

"When, oh, when will this terrible suspense end? I sha'l go mad!" burst out Daring Dick.

"Easy, pard—easy! Things air bunk as they c'u'd be. Thet leetle gals air safe, an' they shall be. Ef ther cusses start ter hurt 'em, we'll lunge in hot an' heavy, an' everlastin'ly lay ther painted pirats out cold. But hit won't do to spile ther biz, skutin' in afore things is ripe, an' thar's a fair show ter skin through wit' out fittin' our leads skinned."

"Thet's the proper way ter sling hit, pard," put in Single Eye. "Perforate my perica'dium, an' chuck me inter a perrarer-dog hole head-fu't, ef hit ain't! Keep cool, an' allow yer ha'r ter grow. Dick; an' thank ther Great Father we-uns leved ther luck ter happen hyer at a time when we're wanted most ormighly tad."

"Heap good talk, Single Eye—heap good talk, Old Rocky. Great Spirit lead Turtle, lead white brothers down San Saba. Save Lily of Leon; save black eye squaw of chief Edwards."

"Heap loud war-cries soon. Heaps scalps. Turtle's belt hang heavy. It is good! Waugh!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

PREPARING A PROGRAMME.

OUR friends witnessed the return of Black Deer, and from the gestures of this warrior in the direction of the big bend, and the placing of an eagle-feather in his fillet, they were satisfied that he had driven back the stampede of mares and mustangs.

They also saw the leading-in of the bandits' horses—the returning of all but six, and saw that number of braves start upon these animals up the river, and knew that they were dispatched to take care of the recovered steeds. This was favorable, for they could easily advance up the river and shoot these six braves at any time, and their departure lessened the number of the war party in the camp.

The scouts and Turtle were positive that no harm would befall the captive maidens—that Rolling Thunder intended to take them to his far-away village.

The chief would not advance further toward the settlements for good reasons.

These were, that he had already secured more horses than he could hope to steal on the border ranches.

He had also taken a number of scalps, as well as considerable provisions and equipage, besides having a Mexican captive for the torture, and two beautiful white maidens.

Our friends were confident now that King Kent would also be brought into the camp a captive.

The Comanche chief expected scalps and captives to be brought in by the braves he had dispatched into the timber in search of the fugitive bandits.

Altogether he was exultant and well-satisfied—in fact, pleased with his success. The reverses of the first portion of the night caused the triumphs of the latter portion to be better appreciated.

But Rolling Thunder was to learn that the avengers he had so dreaded, and who had slain such a number of his warriors and stamped-d his mustangs, had not departed down the San Saba to the Colorado.

Rolling Thunder had no idea that the men whom he so feared were, in any way, connected with the Texans, whom he had killed and scattered; for he knew pretty well, this band must be fugitives from the border settlements—"bad white men"—whose lives would be forfeited, were they captured by their own countrymen.

The concern and anxiety of Daring Dick and his companions, in regard to the captive maidens, can be but faintly imagined.

The occurrences, that have been detailed as happening since the dash of the Comanches into the camp of the Basin Pandits, and their advent in the vicinity of our four friends, occupied but a very short space of time; and it was yet two hours, before the gray streaks of coming morn would illumine the prairies.

All felt the necessity of making a movement toward rescuing the captives before daylight; for the scouts and Turtle were confident that the Comanches would then start with their entire plunder, and the herd of mares, toward the west; and then it would be much more difficult to effect the release of the unfortunate maidens.

The most propitious time to make the attempt, they realized, was the present, when the Indians were elated by their successes, and were kept quite busy in putting things in order for a departure. Besides this, there were now a number of braves absent, in search of the escaped bandits, and others gone to the swell of the bend, to look after the mares and mustangs.

All this was quickly commented and reasoned upon by our friends in a whispered consultation—a yell of terror and agony, sounding through the bottom-timber at the moment they had decided upon a plan of operations. They paused and listened.

"That's one more scalp hangin' ter a Curmanch' belt," said Old Rocky, while Daring Dick shuddered, and Turtle clutched the handle of his knife. "I shouldn't wonder ef ther ha'r-t'arers 'ud skupe in ther hull o' King Kent's cussed gang."

As the old scout's whisper ended, a slight rustle of bushes inland from an adjacent thicket caught the ears of our friends, and instantly knives were jerked from scabbards, and teeta set, while the Tonkaway, upon hands and knees, and his blade between his teeth, started to crawl toward the point of alarm.

All of a sudden a huge hand was thrust from the screen of foliage, the palm outspread toward the four avengers in token of peace, while from the thicket came a sound of caution.

"Hu-s-sh!"

The next moment the huge head, and then the body, followed by the legs, of Big Bill, emerged from the bushes, his eyes becoming fastened upon the Tonkaway, who stood directly in front of him.

At once Big Bill jabbed his bowie buckhorn deep into the earth—a second token of peace—and which was understood by Turtle, who immediately plunged his blade into the ground.

"I wants ter spoke wi' yer, Ole Rock an' Dick," said Big Bill, in a hoarse whisper.

"Come on, an' spit out what yer has ter sling," directed the scout. "We-uns doesn't keer to spend time gabbin' wi' your sort. What yer gut ter offer?"

The giant bandit crawled up nearer.

His clothing and hair were saturated with water, and he was much scratched and torn by the thorny undergrowth.

"I hain't got any extra gab ter sling," asserted the outlaw, "an' I wouldn't come this-a-way, 'cept in' I war wantin' ter help git ther leetle ladies yunder outen ther clutches o' ther red skunks what hes killed nighly all o' my pards."

"We-uns war crooked, I owns ter thet, an' they'd stretch our necks on a lariat ef ther Brazos an' Leon Ranchoeros shu'd catch us. But we ain't nigh on ter bein' es bad es King Kent."

"Fac' air, all on us war feelin' es though we hed a big p'ison snake with us, since he shot his own dad, which war just wuss'n awful, es you'll all 'low. We-uns never done nothin' crooked on ther Brazos, er Leon, 'ceptin' snatch a beef, er hog, er sheep, now an' then, fer ter chaw on, an' sometimes a nag ter ride, ontill King Kent jined us, an' jist run ther band."

"He gi'n us highfalutin' airs, makin' us b'lieve we cu'd run all Texas. We-uns war skeered, an' di'n't want no hand in robbin' his dad, but he swore he'd do hit alone, an' thet we war all soft-headed towards. So Crooked Carl an' me went long o' him, but we warn't 'spectin' thet he'd be any bleed scattered. Cap'n Knowles shot at me an' Carl, but we-uns never gi'n a bullet back."

"King Kent, he war in ther cellar, an' stayed ther when he cu'd ha' got away easy. Then he plugged ther ole man. He's bin wild es a bob tailed hornet ever since; an' I reckon he's bin tuck by ther reds. I an' my nighest pards wouldn't take a hand in stealin' ther gals yunder, an' we kep' King Kent from doin' 'em harm."

"We hed our minds made up ter skute back wi' them, an' take 'em hum, es soon es King Kent gi'n out; which we know'd he would, from his pourin' down terrantal-juice hefty. He war es crazy es a gnat-bit bu'fler when we-uns struck this locate; an' he'd soon ha' gone under."

"Now me, an' Crooked Carl, an' two other pards, what's in ther bush yunder, wants ter help resky ther leetle gals, what's bin tuck by ther cussed Curmanches. We ain't axin' no more, ef we skins through wi' ha'r on own cabases, than ter hev our hosses back, a bag o' grub apiece, an' some amm'nish. Then we'll levant Ole Mex' way, an' locate wi' ther Greasers."

"Thet's waa's ther matter wi' Big Bill an' his three pards. What d'yer say, boyees? Spit her out, lively! I knows ye're too squar' an' white ter plug a pilgrim, what's put his life in yer hands."

"Shake!" exclaimed Daring Dick, extending his hand; "never mind who you are, or what you may have done in the past. You mean well now, it is certain; and you say that you have helped to protect those poor girls from that demon, King Kent."

"Yer kin ax 'em ef Big Bill didn't watch over 'em, an' keep King Kent from doin' 'em harm. I'd ha' split his heart, ef he'd tried it on arter my warnin' him, ef he war my chief; an' ther boyees would ha' stud by me, though ther gold he stole from his dad war jinglin' in ther pockets."

As well as the dim light permitted, the old scouts and Turtle studied the face of Big Bill; as he thus, contrary to his expressed intention, made a lengthy explanation of affairs, and expressed his and his pards' wishes.

Old Rocky looked first at Single Eye, and then at the Tonkaway; reading their minds at once, as he said, briefly:

"Skute fer yer pards, Big Bill! We'll see yer through all hunk, fer perfectin' ther leetle gals."

A low hiss from the giant outlaw, now caused Crooked Carl and two others of the band to crawl forward, and join him.

"Air yer shooters O. K. fer biz, boyees?" asked Old Rocky.

"Ya-as. We-uns ain't ther sort ter be cotched wi' wet powd'r. We draw'd ther loads, an' air all fixed fer pluggin' red meat."

"Now, Turtle; what's ther p'ogramme?" inquired Single Eye, quickly.

"Lead horses down river. H'de in bush. Turtle leave rifle. Dick he leave rifle in bush. All climb tree. Then crawl over river on branch. Old Rocky, Single Eye, Big Bill and pards, fight. Drive Comanche from Lily of Leon and Edwards squaw."

"Drop from trees. Turtle take Edwards squaw. Dick take Lily. Then run, jump in river. Float down to horses. My white brothers, Big Bill and pards, fight, kill, scalp. When squaws safe round bend, run in bush. Shoot fast. Then climb tree. Go over river to horses. It is good. Waugh!"

"Good enough, all 'ceptin' one part o' ther p'ogramme. Turtle, I kin read yer, though I cu'n't read a book. I knows yer wants, Fac' air, ye're 'bout luffed ter gi'n war-whoops, an' shoot, an' sculp; which yer can't do, wi' ther gal. Ain't I right, Tonk?"

"Old Rocky talk heap good. Turtle want scalps. War cry on lips."

"Boyees, I'd like mighty well ter hash ther red

devils; but, ef yer 'grees, I'll save Miss Edna, er I'll flop over, an' make a die of hit, tryin'. I'm big an' strong, an' kin manage hit in ther drink, p'raps better'n any pilgrim hyer.

"Sides thet, ther leetle gal knows I'm chuck-full o' pity fer her, an' thet I hes stud atween her an' King Kent, ther cussed hell-hound!"

Thus spoke Big Bill, by way of amendment, which was seconded by Old Rocky.

"Thank Heaven!" exclaimed Dick, "you have, at length, decided upon a plan of operation. I should have plunged into the river, and tried the game alone, if you had not soon come to an understanding."

"Lead on, Turtle! An' Big Bill, yer kin foller ther Tonk, Injun-style, wi' yer pards. We-uns 'll fotch up ther rear; an' don't none o' yer sling gab, nor snap astick o' deadwood."

"Ther lives o' ther leetle innercent gals depends on every step we-uns takes. We'll watch each other fer signs, an' 'specially all keep a peeper ontur Turtle, ther boss trailer o' Texas!"

Soon the horses were reached, and led slowly; care being taken to prevent the bushes from whisking, and the animals from treading on dead limbs. Down the river, they proceeded for some distance, when the horses were led toward the stream, and into a thicket near the bank.

Great precaution was necessary, as they all knew that the red scouts were searching the timber.

When this was done, all made their way up the Rio San Saba, shielded from view by bushes, to a point directly across from the walled inclosure of saddles and goods, within which lay the poor captives, Edna and Lola.

Here, all stole stealthily up into huge trees, the branches of which were interlocked with the limbs of those on the opposite side of the river.

Upon gaining a favorable elevation, Tonkaway, Daring Dick, the two scouts, with Big Bill and his pards, made their way over the stream, and from tree to tree, until they were in the branches, directly above the maidens. These now lay upon the blankets, their arms entwined about each other.

Despair, anguish, and dread were stamped upon their angelic features.

CHAPTER XXX.

SURPRISING THE CAMP.

THE sight that was revealed below them in the little inclosure, formed of saddles and bags of provisions, rendered our friends and their allies nearly insane with fury, and a longing to attack the merciless enemy.

Lola and Edna lay, as we have seen them clasped in each other's arms, on the outspread blankets; their faces, once so bright, rosy, and well rounded, were now wan and pallid, while tears rolled down their cheeks profusely.

After this one glance beneath them, there was no hesitation.

Luckily, the Comanches were now congregated around Rolling Thunder, some ten yards from the wall of saddles; the chief being engaged in giving directions, in connection with their proposed start toward the west, at sunrise.

The horse-guard had come into camp, and some of the searchers; there being now rather more than a score of warriors present, and all having their arms with them, with the exception of their lances.

With the utmost caution, the little band of rescuers and avengers climbed down slowly to the lower limbs; and then, at a hiss from Turtle, all sprung to the earth, between the inclosure and the graves—all, that is, except Daring Dick and Big Bill—jerked their revolvers, and opening fire instantly; their bullets hurtling through the massed Comanches.

Big Bill and Dick sprung at once over into the inclosure, the fair captives having staggered to their feet with hope upon their faces, expressed at the sound of fire-arms, which they mentally prayed might portend a rescue.

Big Bill clutched Edna, who, beholding Dick with Lola in his embrace, and Turtle with the others fighting the Indians, knew that all was well, and fainted dead away in the strong arms of the giant.

"Lola, my darling—my poor darling! At last I hold you in my arms!"

Thus cried Daring Dick, as he pressed his lips to the almost colorless ones of the poor maiden, who faintly murmured:

"Father in heaven, I thank Thee!"

And then, limp and unconscious, she hung in the embrace of him, who was all the world to her.

Only for a flitting, amid that camp, where whoop, and yell, and death-howl rung, where revolvers rattled, bullets whistled, and tore through flesh and bone, where feathered shafts, their steel points glittering in the starlight, whirled and cut the air, striking the tree trunks with dull thuds, or piercing the white avengers—only for a moment, and then, with their precious burdens, Big Bill and Daring Dick sprung over the bank, into the dark waters of the Rio San Saba.

The current bore them down the stream, while they held the maidens above the waters with one arm, using the other to increase their speed.

Never was there a more complete surprise. Indeed, the Comanches were not only dumfounded, but terrified, when they beheld the dreaded Tonkaway and the white scouts. But the yells of Rolling Thunder kept them from flight, and they stood their ground, many falling before the deadly tubes.

The war-whoop of Turtle, the Tonkaway, rung loud, and he led the whites in a furious charge, the Comanches giving way before the much-feared trio—Turtle, Single Eye, and Old Rocky—in the front, with their murderous knives.

But, well these three knew that their red foes would soon recover, and rush upon them with tiger-like ferocity. So, after the first dash, our friends ran backward, firing as they ran, and bounded into the dark shades, leaving two of their banait allies lying dead, with not less than a dozen arrows in each.

Not one of the party escaped being wounded with the steel-pointed shafts, Crooked Carl having one clear through his shoulder; but the Tonkaway thrust it further, the point free from the flesh, broke it off, and then drew the weapon out.

The Comanches lost eight braves, and others were

wounded; but Turtle, to his great disappointment, had no opportunity to secure a single scalp.

The Indians did not attempt to follow our friends, and in fifteen minutes the latter joined Daring Dick and Big Bill, who had succeeded in bringing Lola and Edna safe with them.

Words can but faintly picture the relief and joy of the poor suffering maidens, at being free from the power of King Kent and the Comanches. But all knew the great danger there was, if they lingered in the vicinity of the now doubly infuriated savages.

Those at the bend, and in the woods, would immediately speed to the camp of their comrades, upon hearing the fusillade of revolver reports, forming a force that, enraged as they were might, from an ambush, annihilate the whole party of whites.

Consequently, our friends—Big Bill, proud to bear Edna Edwards in his arms, he having secured a horse that had strayed from the "open," and Daring Dick, with Lola tightly clasped—with the Tonkaway in the lead, and Crooked Carl in the rear, all hastened to cross the river, and dash on through the timber until the open plain was reached.

No sooner had they cleared the dark shades than yells from the north greeted them, and they beheld a score of ranchoeros, headed by Colonel Landers and Mr. Edwards, galloping up along the timber line likemad.

The agonized parents of the two maidens were frantic with joy as their rescuers delivered them into their arms.

Old Rocky explained, in his peculiar manner, the presence of Big Bill and Crooked Carl; and both, in consideration of their valuable services, received respectful treatment.

The party of ranchoeros, however, were furiously eager to press on after King Kent; swearing that they would not return home until they had hung the miscant; and Old Rocky, Turtle and Single Eye decided that an advance must at once be made to capture the mares and mustangs, as well as the horses of the outlaws—swearing that if any Comanches escaped their bullets, they should walk back to their villages.

But the horses of the ranchoeros were in a fagged condition and it was considered necessary to rest; Turtle asserting that the war-party, or that portion of it that remained, could not escape, even was the pursuit not pressed not pressed until daylight, which was not far off.

All, therefore, dismounted in a timber-cove, loosened the girths of the saddles and rubbed down their animals with cool green grass; allowing them to drink at the river at a reasonable time after the halt.

The maidens were made as comfortable as was possible, and partook of food brought by the ranchoeros for the first time with any appetite since their capture.

The dread and tragic scenes and the sufferings the poor girls had undergone were soon known to all, and the most intense hatred and loathing were entertained by the whole party toward King Kent. None could tell, however, whether the miscreant yet lived.

The parents of the maidens, with three other ranchoeros and Crooked Carl, who had been severely wounded, now remained to guard Edna and Lola, while the other, including the old scouts, with the Tonkaway and Daring Dick, departed on their mission of vengeance and to recover the animals, just as the sun peeped over the horizon.

They found the bandit camp deserted by the Comanches, their dead having been removed, and the horses and plunder taken away also.

Turtle decided at once to make for the neck of the bend in order to cut off the war-party before they left the same; or, if they had departed, to be nearer the plain, which would enable them to see the red fee some distance off.

In due time, the avengers, twenty in number, reached the point mentioned; but did not leave the timber, remaining to peep through the foliage, out on the plain, across the entrance to the bend, and then down to the swell of the same.

To the great satisfaction of all, the herd of mares, with the mules and horses, were in plain view, feeding; also many mustangs, while a dozen or more Comanches were to be seen equipping others for the trail.

Many animals, heavily packed with plunder, could be distinguished, even at that long distance.

At once, the avengers, keeping within the timber, secure from discovery, proceeded toward the Comanche camp.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE WAY OF THE TRANSGRESSOR.

AFTER the retreat of the scouts, Turtle, Dick, and the two outlaw allies, with the captive maidens, the Comanches were the most terribly demoralized savages that can be imagined; but Rolling Thunder realized at once that his whole war party would be annihilated, did he not at once take steps to return to his village.

Already had two-thirds of his braves gone on the "long, dark trail," to the land beyond the moon. This war, however, to a great extent repaid, by the plunder, and the great number of horses and mules that he had captured.

Could he but reach his village with all this, he would be considered a victor by the civil chief. Indeed, it would be a great honor to return with so many horses and so few warriors, especially when he could report that but a small number of his braves had been scalped.

The chief, therefore yelled his orders with fierce imperativeness, and at once the warriors rushed to obey; glad, indeed, that they were to leave so dangerous a locality—they being filled with superstitious terror at the sudden and unexpected advent of the terrible scouts and the Tonkaway.

The horses, captured from the bandits, were all led into camp, the mules as well; and the plunder, and the dead braves were fastened upon their backs, after they had been equipped. The slain bandits were scalped and hacked beyond the semblance of humanity, and then flung into the river, to become food for the ravenous alligators and catfish.

In an incredibly short time all were ready to proceed toward their former camp.

At this moment, greatly to the joy of the Co-

manches, two of their scouts dragged from the shades, none other than King Kent, the parricide! The miserable wretch was a fearful sight to behold.

He was saturated with water, and blood flowed from knife-wounds in his hands, arms, and shoulders. His ghastly face was scratched, and there was a deep gash across his forehead.

His clothing was nearly all torn from his form; only his boots and buckskin breeches remaining upon him; the latter, all tattered and torn by the thorny thickets.

A deep, but low, whoop of exultation sounded. It was plain that King Kent had lost much blood, and there was an insatiable stare in his black and glittering eyes, from which all shrank.

"Friends of the llanos!" he yelled, in an unnatural voice; "give me some whisky! You have taken all I had—all!"—jerking one arm free, and waving it toward the plunder-burdened animals—"all was mine! Give me whisky, or I will scalp every demon of you!"

"Where whisky?" demanded the Comanche chief, quickly, his eyes glittering.

King Kent struggled to free himself, and the chief, by a gesture, ordered his captors to release their hold.

Instantly bounding to one of the pack-mules, the miserable being detached a box from the same, which was inclosed in a bag, and had not in the excitement been opened; indeed the plunder had not been examined as yet, for there had been no time to do so.

Jerking a scalping-knife from the belt of a brave with electric-like motion—the warrior bounding aside to avoid an unexpected blow—King Kent inserted the blade beneath the cover of the box, and at once burst it off.

There were half-a-dozen quart bottles inside, packed in saw-dust; and, clutching one, Kent knocked off the neck with the back of the knife-blade, and tearing a tin-cup from a saddle-horn, poured the same nearly full, and drank it with insane avidity.

He had had an opportunity to escape, by quickly plunging into the river; but he neglected this, that he might satisfy his terrible burning thirst.

Having swallowed the whisky, the wretch was at once seized, by the order of Rolling Thunder, and his arms bound behind him. Then he was placed astride of a horse, being secured to the animal.

The Comanches all drank from the bottle, knocking off the necks of two more before being satisfied, and stopped by their chiefs.

Half an hour afterward they were entering the old camp to be welcomed by the braves sent before them; who had not dared leave the animals when they heard the sounds of conflict, until a messenger was sent to order them to do so.

These braves were now regaled by a bottle of whisky.

Juan, the Mexican, had been lowered from the tree-top, and was now bound to its trunk.

The whisky they had drunk caused the Indians to be less fearful of danger and more eager for revenge.

It was at once decided to torture the captives.

The miserable Greaser was at once cut loose, and bound to a stake in the "open."

King Kent was bound to another stake, in front of Juan, the latter hurling curses in the teeth of his chief, who had brought him to so terrible a death. Then he would pray for succor to all the saints in the calendar, and call upon *Ma re de Dios* to forgive him his sins and receive his soul.

The Comanches formed a ring, arrows in hand, around the two captives; then, with whoop and yell, they danced in spasmodic hop and bound, circling to the right, their dance becoming faster and faster, their hideous faces contorting with hellish glee and a thirst for blood.

The circle of warriors changed position, while yet dancing in such a manner as to enable one portion of the same, as they flew past Juan, to reach him with their arrow-heads.

Then, as each brave shot past him in the hellish dance, he drew his arrow-point across the flesh of the shrieking Mexican, until he was literally a mass of gore; his frame, from head to foot, being all gaping gashes!

Then, with a terrific whoop, Rolling Thunder sprang forward, and circling his knife about the head of the doomed wretch, tore off the reeking scalp the most horrible shrieks and screams bursting from Juan's lips.

Immediately after the chief drew his blade across the breast of the Mexican, thus disemboweling him!

One fearful and unearthly yell of agony the most deathly shot from the ill-starred Greaser's lips, his eyes filmed in death, a gurgling sound issued from his throat, and his head sunk upon his gory and mutilated breast. Juan, the Mexican *vaguer*, the treacherous employee of Colonel Landers, and a Basin Bandit, was dead!

The eyes of King Kent were fixed in a stony stare upon his follower during this most hellish scene; but no sooner was Juan dead than half a dozen savages cut the parricide loose and dragged him toward the river, which they crossed upon a log; two of the braves carrying lariats in hand. In ten minutes they stood upon the top of the high cliff, at the point where they had, the early part of that eventful night, suspended Daring Dick.

Instantly one end of each lariat was tied in a running noose and placed around the ankles of the doomed man, whose facial nerves were now twitching violently.

The boots were drawn from his feet, and the legs of his buckskin breeches cut off at the thighs, and then removed.

The other ends of the lariats were secured to the trunks of dwarf trees which grew on the margin of the cliff, and the braves were about to lower their victim down to die a horrible death, when, by a superhuman effort, King Kent burst the bonds that bound his arms, and clutching a brave with each hand by the hair of the head, he sprang from the cliff—a piercing, horrible yell shooting from his lips!

The two braves shot down with far-sounding death-hoofs, leaving the hair torn out by the roots in the clutch of the desperate miscreant. The latter brought up at thirty feet with a terrible force and a twang of

jerked rope, accompanied by the unmistakable sound of the cracking of bones.

There he hung, the long black hair of two of his torturers, together with their eagle-feathers, held tight, his features convulsed with deadly agony, but making no effort to bend upward and grasp the rope to relieve his brain from the pressure of rushing blood upon it, and for the very good reason that his ankle-bones were broken by the terrific jerk of the ropes around them when straightened by his weight.

Rolling Thunder and his braves stood, as upon the former occasion, on the clear belt between the trees and the river; and yells of fury burst from their lips, as over the bank dashed the trio—the two braves whirling as they went, and striking flat upon the waters which killed them instantly.

The warriors above were dumfounded, and by no means free from terror, as they gazed downward; but there was no more fearful torture to be thought of than the death to which they had doomed King Kent.

By this time the sun was peeping above the eastern horizon, and the braves gave a yell of triumph; for out from the hundreds of cave-like openings in the cliff swarmed thousands of bees!

At once the warriors rushed back and tore huge armfuls of long bottom-grass from the sod, and then returning, cast little by little downward, near the swaying form of their victim.

This maddened the bees, and the infuriated insects, in place of darting through the air, prairie-ward, to rob the flowers of their sweets, circled by thousands about the entrances to their homes; and then, discovering the strange swaying form, shot in clouds toward, and swarmed upon, the miserable wretch, stinging him in ten thousand places!

Not the size of a pin of his flesh escaped. They crawled over each other, changing places ever to sting afresh, while the most fearful shrieks shot from the parricide, in his agony.

There hung King Kent, swinging at the ends of the lariats, suspended over the San Saba cliff, with little resemblance to a human being, his head hanging downward, his ankles broken, and his form twice its natural size from the swarms of torturing insects that collected upon it!

For a time he uttered intelligible words and appeals for mercy, then only terrible howls were heard from him.

Surely the wretched parricide was doomed to an awful death, and one from which there was no escape!

With exultant yells the Comanches rushed to their camp and hastily equipped their animals, realizing that they had revealed their position, and imperiled their safety by their whoops and yells.

At length Rolling Thunder mounted his horse, his braves as well as their chief gazing with great satisfaction over the immense herd of animals and the amount of plunder they had secured; but at that moment the thunderous report of a score of rifles almost simultaneously burst on the air and the warriors who had gathered around Rolling Thunder fell like dry reeds before the north wind.

Then, out from the timber dashed the rancheeros, with the terrible trio of avengers, and with a ringing signal-whoop of retreat, the Comanche chief lashed his horse toward the opposite side of the bend, followed by his surviving braves—twelve in number—and the hurtling leaden balls from the revolvers of the Texans. The latter, as the Indians fled into the timber, jerked rein, satisfied that it would be useless to follow in the shades.

Then it was that terrible cries from the cliff attracted the attention of all, and, leaving two rancheeros to prevent the herd from galloping away, the remainder sped to investigate.

When they reached the clear belt, and discovered the black mass suspended from the cliff, and bearing the semblance of a man—the hanging head downward, with ankles extended—then all shuddered with horror, all seeing the infuriated bees flying upon, and from the swaying form.

As they thus sat their horses, a deathly shriek came out from among the mass of bees; the suspended form became contorted and convulsed, forcing the torturing insects to fly from it, and the swollen, gashed, and ghastly body of King Kent, the parricide, was seen, and recognized.

A spasmodic shudder followed the departure of the bees; then the arms fell limp, the body hung the same, and all knew that life had departed—that they were gazing upon the corpse of the king of miscreants.

All galloped from the accursed spot, as again a black mass of bees swarmed upon the corpse; and hastily driving the scattered animals in, forming a compact herd, the Texans drove them to a favorable point for fording. There they crossed the San Saba; and soon were in the timber-cove, with a herd of over two hundred mares, horses, and mules, and thousands of dollars' worth of plunder.

King Kent was reported dead, to Lola and Edna; but they were not informed as to the nature and cause of his death.

The men who had remained in camp shuddered with horror, when they heard the whole story; believing that a just God had punished the parricide, assassin, and abductor, for his many dastardly and awful crimes.

CHAPTER XXXII.

AS ALL WOULD HAVE IT.

DEAR reader, we have little more to record, in connection with those whom we have followed through dread dangers, and trials of privation and fatigue.

The rancheeros took entire charge of the mares and mustangs, as well as of the horses that had belonged to the Basin Bandits.

Colonel Landers insisted that Big Bill and Crooked Carl should accept employment with him; believing that they would, after their checkered experiences, and realizing that the way of the transgressor is hard, in the future lead honest lives; and we are glad to record that the confidence of the old rancheero was not misplaced—that those who volunteered to risk their lives in righting a wrong, in which they had refused to have a hand, although they were criminals in the consideration of Texans, became henceforth honest men.

Bill and Carl continued to lead upright lives, be-

ing encouraged so to do, by the invariable kindness of the colonel and Daring Dick.

They were expert *vagueros*, and could throw the lasso dexterously; and Colonel Landers soon saw the day that he could not well get along without them.

It was some time before Edna and Lola entirely recovered from the privation and great mental agony they had experienced, while held captives to King Kent and the Comanches. The former remained, for some weeks, at Landers Ranch; but Daring Dick, who would not permit Lola to wander far from the ranch alone, frequently rode with the maidens to the home of Edna's father.

Old Rocky, Single Eye, and Turtle, the Tonkaway, remained for a time, camped in the bottom-timber; the horses of the Basin Bandits, and the mustangs of the Comanches, together with the plunder of both camps being disposed of by the colonel and Dick, and the proceeds divided among the scouts.

They, however, forced Big Bill and Crooked Carl to share the money with them.

Colonel Landers had received a terrible shock, as had also Mr. Edwards, by the abduction of their daughters; and the colonel, in future, remained at home much more than formerly, while both the rancheeros strove in every way to promote the happiness of their children.

The horse of Mickey McCafferty gave out, in the rapid gallop on the trail toward the Colorado, to the rescue; and the rancheeros were obliged to leave the redoubtable Irishman behind. He, then, with his saddle-bag of provisions, climbed a huge tree, leaving his steed in an adjacent "open," lariat-ed out to grass.

From his elevated perch, Mickey watched the plain for the return of the party, and secured himself to the limbs with a raw-hide rope, when night came; enduring great terrors from the howls of wolves and other animals, by which he expected at any time to be devoured.

But all things must have an end, and so did the enforced stay of Mickey in his uncomfortable position in the tree; which, to use his own words, caused him to be "as stiff as a bowl o' starch." At last, when he had nearly given up in despair, believing that the outlaws had shot all the rancheeros, the latter suddenly appeared in sight, on the far-off prairie.

But, not for some time did the Irishman become convinced that they were his friends.

The herd was too numerous, he thought, and he feared that it must be the bandits returning, or possibly Indians; and Mickey prayed without ceasing, until he recognized the Colonel, Daring Dick, and the two "ger-ruls." Then he nearly broke his neck, in his joy; giving a wild hurrah, and circling his old battered plug hat above his head, forgetting his exalted position.

Down came Mickey McCafferty; but, fortunately for him, he lodged upon a limb, which he clutched in desperation.

Then he hastily descended, saddled his horse, and galloped wildly toward the cavalcade; yelling with joy, to greet Lola and Edna, and nearly stampeding the animals. He thus succeeded in drawing upon his head the curses of the rancheeros.

However, Mickey was warmly welcomed, and it is almost needless to say that he remained at Landers Ranch until the day of his death, which was tragic indeed.

The *vagueros* often teased him, for having allowed the maidens to be carried away without striking a blow in their defense; and he was always afraid to go near the scene of the shooting match and abduction. Some years after the events we have recorded, being quizzed for never having visited the big basin, which had been the retreat of the bandits, Mickey vowed that he would go there, and go alone, leaving proofs of his visit.

He kept his word.

And ghastly proofs he did leave.

These were no more or less than his own mortal remains; for his horse wandered in the thickets, and the poor Irishman not knowing the exact location of the basin, man and mustang plunged through the bordering bushes into the deep chasm, at the same point at which King Kent had performed the feat.

Mickey's neck was broken!

Not returning, a search was made the same night, and the dead body of the faithful Irishman was found. Landers Ranch was long a house of mourning for the honest and boyish Mickey.

But, as may be presumed, it was not a very long time after the fair Lola had become her own dear self again, before she was united in marriage to the man to whom she had given her whole heart—Daring Dick, her princely lover, her hero!

In short, it was three months, to a day, from the date of the return to the big bend of the San Saba, that Richard Robinson and Lola Landers were wed. At the same time Lola Edwards was united in the holy bonds to a handsome and wealthy young rancheero, an ex-lieutenant of Texan Rangers.

Turtle, the Tonkaway, Single Eye, and Old Rocky, we may be sure, were present on the joyful occasion, besides all the rancheeros, scouts and rangers within a day's ride; the marriages taking place beneath a grand old dome of Nature, in the bottom-timber, from which depended long festoons of moss, and a thousand and one flowering vines.

An extensive barbecue was gotten up by the colonel for the guests, a dance in the ranch following in the evening, and all went merry, as it should upon such an occasion.

No more beautiful and angelic maiden than Lola Landers was ever wedded.

Daring Dick appeared, on the occasion, in richly-ornamented buckskin from neck to heel. This had been presented to him by Turtle, the Tonkaway chief.

Dick and Lola are now a middle-aged couple, with children who are young men and young women; Dick being a wealthy rancheero, on the Rio San Saba, near to the big bend, where he so narrowly escaped meeting a horrible death, and where, as we know, died in the very extremity of despair and torturing agony that a human being could suffer, one whose soul was stained with the blackest crimes that could possibly be recorded—Kent Knowles, or "King Kent," the parricide, and captain of the "BASIN BANDITS."

THE END.

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